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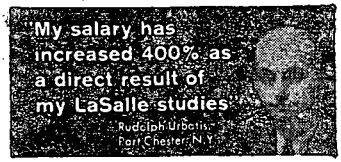

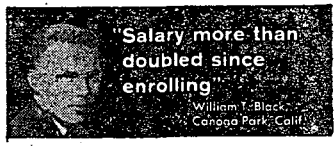

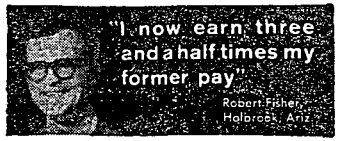

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the *newest* short story by
HUGH PENTECOST

Meet a new character just created by Hugh Pentecost—John Jericho, six-foot-six, 240 pounds, artist by profession, but one-time commando in Korea and all-the-time crusader and gentleman-adventurer—in a phrase, a big man who cannot resist helping an underdog, or a damsel in distress.

In his first adventure in print (the big man is destined to be a series-protagonist in full-length novels), Jericho performs his specialty in New England skiing country—an interesting background, with interesting characters (whether you happen to be a skier or not). We'll be reading more about this artist-adventurer with the bright red beard who is always "taking sides"—one of the surest ways of getting into trouble . . .

JERICHO AND THE SKIING CLUE

by HUGH PENTECOST

EVERY BONE IN JOHN JERICHO'S six-foot-six, two-hundred-and-forty-pound body ached. Someone had pitched him a curve when Jericho was told that skiing, like swimming or horseback riding, was a sport you never forgot. You might remember techniques instinctively, but your muscles remembered absolutely nothing.

It was a pleasant kind of fatigue, however. Despite aching bones he had managed several of the more difficult upper trails at Darlbrook that afternoon, and as a climax he had negotiated what would be the official course for the New England downhill competitions the next day—in slow time, but none the less he had negotiated it.

He had been in for some surprises. He had learned his skiing fifteen years ago in the Swiss Alps. He had been trained in the Arlberg or French technique in which shoulder rotation was the key to all directional changes. That shoulder swing was a powerful movement that pulled your skis around through the snow. For a turn to the left you wound your shoulders back to the right and then swung them to the left; the force of that swing turned the skis to the left, with the tips pointing in the new direction and the backs of the skis following along like the caboose of a train. There was much up-and-down motion in the knees and hips to keep the weight off the back of the skis.

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None of the youngsters on the Darlbrook slopes that day had used the Arlberg method. Everything today was the shortswing, the heel thrust, and the comma position. Shoulder rotation was out. The shoulders lagged behind, following after the skis had been set in a new direction. This new method of changing direction consisted of a subtle outward thrust of the heels, with shoulders twisted in the direction opposite to the turn. Instead of bending forward from the hips, these modern kids kept their bodies almost erect—upper body out over the skis, knees and hips curved toward the slope in the comma position.

It was a beautiful thing to watch, and it made Jericho feel like an old-fashioned bare-knuckles prizefighter pitted against the modern skills of a Sugar Ray Robinson in his prime.

Jericho was stretched out on the foam rubber cushion that covered a bench under the frost-coated picture window of Darlbrook Lodge's main lounge, overlooking the Vermont hills. He was full of fresh air, the need for sleep—and for another tall drink. In the center of the big room was a huge circular fireplace on which five-foot logs burned and sputtered. The fire produced almost the only light in the crowded room. Somewhere across the lounge a folksinger was bent over a sweet-sounding guitar. Everyone in the room listened with at least half an ear. There was a low chatter of conversation about the day's adventures and the competitions scheduled for the next two.

Jericho looked at his empty glass, decided to aim for the bar across the room, started to rise and instantly dropped back, moaning. At 40 you should take things easier to start with. He lay still, his bright red beard pointing upward. A fresh cascade of laughter made him turn his head.

He had noticed the girl earlier, both with a man's eye and the eye of an artist. He had decided that what stretch pants did for a woman's figure explained why skiing had become the most popular sport since bundling. This one had dark red hair, and the icy pastels of her *apres*-ski costume blending into the warm tones of the fireplace embers set off a spectacular figure in spectacular fashion.

"What goes in it?" she asked, her cool fingers touching Jericho's hand as she took his glass.

"Bourbon and water," he said. "But don't go away."

She laughed again. "I'll be back, maestro."

He watched her thread her way across the room to the bar, moving in and out of the couples stretched on the fur rugs around the fireplace. He thought the shortswing technique was a part of her everyday manner of walking.

He sat up, subduing a groan, and realized he was out of key in more ways than his passe skiing technique.

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His worn corduroy jacket and loose fitting wool pants definitely stamped him Stone Age.

The pastel girl came back with his drink, properly dark in color. He was pleased when she sat down on the bench beside him.

"I'm Valerie Carter," she said. "People call me Val."

"I'm John Jericho," he said. "Nobody has ever called me Jack."

"Jack wouldn't go with the beard," she said, "although you couldn't have had that when you were a kid. Oh, I know all about you, John Jericho. About a month ago I saw an exhibition of your paintings at the Crankshaw Gallery in New York. And I saw you too. I read the story about you in the catalogue—commando in Korea, gentleman-adventurer who paints pictures between delivering right crosses to the jaw."

"Ouch!" Jericho said. "It's just that I'm so big. People are always coming to me and asking me to be on their side. I have an unfortunate impulse to take sides. So naturally I get into trouble."

"That's why I'm here," Valerie Carter said. There was a faint frown above the pert nose, and suddenly her dark blue eyes clouded.

"Not just a Good Samaritan? I could never have made the bar, you know."

"I'd like it if you laughed a little and pretended we were just having ordinary chit-chat," Val said. "We're being watched."

Jericho smiled without looking away from her. "And I was hoping you were here because I'm so handsome," he said. "The only reason anyone could have for watching us is green, boiling jealousy. I could feel it myself if you went away from me."

"That's only a small part of it," she said. "He's the crew-cut blond at the bar. Don't look at him now."

" 'Dear Miss Lonelyhearts'," Jericho murmured.

"He's going to die unless we can help him, John," Val said gravely.

"At least it's 'we' and not just me," Jericho said. "Come on, Val—nobody dies of a broken heart."

He had taken his black, curved-stem pipe out of his pocket and he managed to drop a package of matches on the floor. As he bent down to pick it up he glanced at the bar. The crew-cut blond gent was strikingly good-looking in profile—a Teutonic version of the Apollo of Belvedere—tall, broad-shouldered, lithe.

"He won't ask for help," Val said.

"He doesn't look as though he needed it," Jericho said. He began to fill his pipe from an old oilskin pouch.

"He's Carl Kramer," Val said. "German—West German. He's been in this country three years. He's going to be an American—if he lives. And he's my guy, John."

He grinned at her. "No hope for me?" he asked.

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"No hope for you—or for me—unless we can help him," she said.

"When I look at you I'm all ears," Jericho said, holding a match to the bowl of his pipe. "But let's say I am listening, whatever else."

"If he knew I was talking about him he would come over, very cold and very hard, and take me away."

"He's not big enough," Jericho said.

"He's a lovely guy, John, who doesn't deserve to die." She drew a deep breath. "It's a very short story. Carl and his family were separated by the Berlin wall. Carl was on the right side—our side. He was part of a secret group trying to get East Berliners over and under the wall. He joined it with his own family in mind, and eventually he got them to safety. He kept on fighting with his friends, though. They'd helped him, so he had to go on helping them. He sent his mother and two sisters to America, but he stayed behind.

"One day he discovered that a new member of his organization was a traitor—a spy for the East Germans. I don't know exactly what happened—he won't talk about it. But—he killed the man. It must have been self-defense, because there was a trial and Carl was cleared. But he was no longer of any use to his organization. He was a marked man. So he joined his family over here. Part of his education had been in England. He speaks English better than you and I do. He's an aeronautics engineer, a brilliant one. He has a fine job at Sperry, and he thought all the black shadows of the past were behind him. He was—until a week ago—happily employed, with his family safe—and in love with me."

"He can't have fallen out of love," Jericho said.

She made an impatient gesture. "A week ago he got word from a friend in West Berlin. Someone connected with the man Carl had killed—or with the East German Intelligence—has come here to kill Carl."

"It's against the law," Jericho said gently. "So we turn the assassin over to the cops and that's that. Who is he?"

"That's the joker," Val said. "We don't know who he is. We don't know what he looks like. The only thing we know about him is that he is an expert skier, of Olympic calibre."

"So you both stay away from ski places."

"I'm a fashion designer," Val said. "Ski clothes are my business. I have to go to ski places. And skiing is Carl's sport. He's tops at it. But suppose we did stay away? It wouldn't really help. Actually, there's a better chance of spotting this man in a place like this than on Madison Avenue."

Jericho blew a cloud of smoke from his pipe. "Why won't your Carl accept help?"

"Because he feels it's hopeless. If

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this man doesn't get him there will be another—or another. And if an outsider helps, he too may be killed."

"But you're asking me to help. You don't think an outsider may also be killed?"

"I read the story about you in the catalogue," she said, looking up at him. "I thought you might help—just because what is going on is so *wrong*!"

He put a big hand out and covered her small cold one. "I'll help," he said. "But in turn I need help. I came here to paint—to paint people in motion. I don't know this ski crowd at all."

She smiled at him. "I saw you on Widows' Slope this afternoon. I thought you were going to break your neck. But you were really quite good in an old-fashioned sort of way."

"I'm as old as God," Jericho said, looking at her vivid youth thoughtfully. Men of forty did become involved with girls of twenty-two or -three—and quite successfully. Old-fashioned, indeed!

"I can write off a hundred and fifty of the two hundred people here at the lodge," Val said. "The other fifty?" She shrugged. "If we could trace them all down—but the man may be here, now, in this very room, watching Carl—and us. It could happen tonight. Or tomorrow on the slopes. There isn't time for a long, detailed investigation of people."

And then her voice changed to a little rueful wail. "Be my stern uncle! Be anything! But save me!"

"What's wrong?" he asked sharply.

"Coming toward us," she said. "A very nice, absolutely fatheaded young man who simply refuses to believe that I am a staid, engaged woman!"

The young man approaching them was of medium height with a pleasant, somewhat fatuous smile on his face. He had evidently just come in from outside because he was still wearing ski boots and a snow-streaked fur parka. He was carrying a tray with two martinis and a highball on it.

"The snow bunny to end all snow bunnies," Val said. "Notice the socks worn outside his stretch pants? That five-hundred-dollar Alaska-Arctic parka? Hundred-dollar boots? And I can tell you his Kneissl White Star skis cost him two hundred dollars. Somebody sold him the works! And he can't slide down the front lawn without getting tangled up in his skis and darn near breaking his neck. And because Carl has retired into his shell he's decided to make a play for me!"

"You could try being haughty," Jericho said.

"The trouble is I can hardly keep from laughing," she said. "He's really a very nice kid. But I'm not in the mood."

The young man arrived with his tray. "Hi, Val," he said. "Very dry

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ones for you and me." He handed one of the martinis to Val and grinned at Jericho. "I took the liberty of inquiring at the bar what you were drinking, sir. You looked a little too big for me to get rid of. I thought perhaps I could charm you into leaving me alone with my gal. My name's Pat McGrath."

Jericho knocked out his pipe in an ashtray and smiled. "I'm going to surprise you, Pat," he said. "I'll accept the drink and give you ten minutes alone with Val. Then I'll be back."

"No!" Val said.

"It's best," Jericho said, realizing that her "No!" was not a protest at being left alone with the amiable ski bunny. She had guessed what he was going to do.

He walked across the room to the bar and stood beside Carl Kramer. There was a tight, hard smile on the young German's lips.

"So she told you," he said.

"She told me," Jericho replied, putting his drink down on the bar.

"I don't want any help," Kramer said.

"Then you're a fool—if this is for real."

Kramer's laugh was short, mirthless. "It's for real, all right. But stay out of it, Mr. Jericho. There's no reason for you to get hurt."

"There's a hell of a good reason," Jericho said. "Now that I *do* know I wouldn't sleep well if I turned my back on you." He swung around so that he could look out over the shadowy room. "No suspicions?"

"Stay out of it, Mr. Jericho." Kramer brought his fist down on the bar. "Or, if you insist, stay in it only long enough to persuade Val to let me run my own risks. This is between me and this man, just as it was between me and—and the other—back in West Germany. There's no way you can help, nothing you can do—nothing, I tell you!"

"I'm not flattered," Jericho said.

"Do you think I enjoy seeing Val spend time with you, or with that grinning ape, McGrath?" Kramer said, his voice low and tense. "I want her to myself—now and for always. But there isn't going to be any always without terrible danger to her. It's quite possible the man I'm waiting for may try to attack me through her—or through my family, God help them. The best thing I can do is to stay out in the open—alone—and wait."

"Romantic, heroic, and nonsensical," Jericho said cheerfully. "Instead of waiting for him, I suggest we get to him first. Old military maxim, my friend: he who gets there 'fustest with the mostest' wins the war."

Carl Kramer was human. The screaming tensions under which he'd been living for a week seemed to give way in the company of the giant, red-bearded artist. Jericho's very size was reassuring. And Kra-

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mer knew that he was not a dilettante at action. The facts of Kramer's story tumbled out of him, as he stood there at the bar with Jericho.

The man Kramer had killed in Germany had been a white-haired boy in the East German Intelligence. Since his trial had brought Carl out in the open, no part of Germany was safe for Kramer any more. He had been carefully guarded until he left for New York.

He thought he would be relatively safe in the United States, and he had been for almost three years. Then word came from a friend in West Berlin: the avenger is coming.

The avenger's name was Hans Huber. He and the man killed by Kramer had been close friends and partners in the East German Intelligence Service. Huber was said to be their top man, cold, clever, and without conscience.

Kramer's friend had no physical description of Huber. He was, the friend had written, a man of many faces. He was also a brilliant linguist who could live in England, France, or anywhere else and pass as a native. Only one other scrap of information was added to this meager description: Huber was a superb skier. He had been the top German in the Olympic trials of 1960, but had withdrawn from the competition itself, probably for political reasons.

"This will be a perfect place for him to hide," Kramer said. "For the next two days fine skiers will be the rule here, not the exception." He took a deep drag on a cigarette. "I've gone over the entries in the competition with the committee. They all seem genuine enough—all have established reputations—and not one is unknown to the officials."

"So maybe he's not here," Jericho said.

"I can feel him in my bones," Kramer said grimly. "He's here. I can feel his eyes on me."

"Nerves," Jericho suggested.

"I don't have that kind of nerves, Mr. Jericho."

"All right, I'll buy it for the sake of discussion," Jericho said. "One thing we can count on. Your man doesn't want to be caught. He's a professional. He expects to do his job and get away with it. So it isn't going to happen here, in a crowd. He will wait until he can get at you alone. So it's simple—don't be alone."

"I want to get it over with," Kramer said, "one way or another."

Jericho looked around the fire-lit room. The people were almost like the faceless members of a costumed ballet—the stretch pants, the sweaters, the *apres*-ski boots, some of the girls in long pastel skirts. To the correct music they might all suddenly rise and dance, graceful, sinuous, lithe, with a curiously cool sexuality. The joyous sport of skiing, Jericho thought, might have remained forever the domain of a

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handful of enthusiasts if it hadn't been for the invention of women's stretch pants—and what they did for a woman's figure.

"We must arrange," Jericho said, "to have you alone, and yet not alone. I suggest that we plan very carefully where you will go tomorrow—out on the slopes. Some place away from the general activity. I will be there first, waiting and watching. If Huber hasn't guessed what we're up to he may make his move."

"No," Kramer said.

Jericho's bright blue eyes turned his way. "You're afraid?"

"I haven't the energy to be angry with you, Mr. Jericho," Kramer said. He nodded across the room toward Valerie Carter who was laughing at some clowning routine of the ski bunny. "I *am* afraid for her. If she's left unguarded, the attack may be against her. If Huber got control of her I would have to go anywhere, do anything, he ordered me to do. Huber knows that."

Jericho grinned. "She doesn't have to be alone," he said. "McGrath will stay with her, given the chance, even if he has to break a leg to keep up with her."

"Huber could twist him around his little finger," Kramer said contemptuously.

"All he has to be is a witness—Huber isn't going to do anything in front of a witness. Make sure that Val stays with the crowd or with McGrath."

"If anything happened to her—" Kramer's voice was a whisper because he had suddenly lost control of it.

It was a bright clear day, cloudless, the sky so blue it was painful to look up at it even through tinted goggles. Jericho, crouching in a little patch of pine growth on the top of the hill, stretched his aching muscles. A few yards away Carl Kramer, out in the open, maneuvered gracefully on his skis.

They were far away from the chair lifts and the T-bars and the ropetows that took tireless skiers to the top of the formal slopes. Out here there was only Kramer and hundreds of acres of unmarked snow—three or four inches on top of a solid three-foot base.

Just below the pine growth was a sheer drop to the valley below—a half mile of what looked almost like concave face. On the other side were little dips into small hollows. Kramer, the expert, played about in this simple skiing area—waiting—making certain that he was constantly seen at the top of the hill. He moved near the pine growth, pushing hard on his poles. Without looking Jericho's way, he spoke clearly.

"Two hours," he said. "He didn't fall for it."

Jericho, who had been in his hiding place since daybreak, grimaced. "Let's give him a little more time."

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Kramer started away toward one of the little slopes, pushing on his poles. Suddenly he stopped.

"Damn!" he said.

"What's wrong?" Jericho called to him.

"Val!" Kramer said. "She and that goon McGrath. I told her on no account to follow us."

"She loves you," Jericho said drily. "Get over that slope and out of sight."

Jericho changed his position so that he could watch the girl and McGrath struggling up the hill, following the clear trail of Kramer's skis. McGrath, tangled in poles and skis, falling every few steps, was laughing. Val, her face almost hidden by goggles and a knitted wool cap, was forced to wait for him, and she was obviously impatient.

"That puts an end to it," Kramer said. "Huber won't show with an army up here."

"*Get out of sight!*" Jericho thundered at him.

The big man bent down to check his bindings, and then he stood up and ski-walked out to the back of the pine growth. He pulled his goggles down over his eyes. There was a curiously set look to the mouth behind the red beard and mustache. Val and the struggling McGrath were about fifty yards below him. They had evidently not spotted Kramer before he ducked out of sight. McGrath had taken another spill and lay twisted in the snow, his skis at a grotesque angle; he was laughing weakly. Val had to go back to him, help untangle the hodge podge of skis and poles, and pull him to his feet.

"I'm sorry, Val, but I've had it," Jericho heard McGrath say.

Jericho bent forward, pushing with his poles, and when he came out around the pine growth he was moving fast. He headed straight for Val and McGrath, snowplowing to a stop as he reached them, and spraying them with the fine powdered snow.

"Avalanche!" he shouted at the top of his lungs.

Val and McGrath stared at him.

"Ski patrol warning everyone," Jericho said, panting. "I was deputized. You'd better get out of here, and fast." He pointed down the perilous half mile to the valley below. "If you can get to the pine woods at the bottom there, you'll be safe. For God's sake hurry, Val!"

She stared at McGrath. "What about him?"

"I'll take care of him," Jericho said. "You get going!"

She glanced up at the mountaintop. The hot sun could have started the dreaded avalanche of snow and ice. It would come with the runaway speed of an express train.

"Good luck!" she shouted, and pushed off.

Jericho watched her slip away over the rim of the hill. He figuratively crossed his fingers. There were man-killing boulders and stumps on that dangerous descent. Then he

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turned to McGrath. The comic look had faded from the ski bunny's face, and there was a white, pinched look around his nose and mouth.

"I'll help you up into that pine growth," Jericho said. "You'll never make it down, Pat. If you're buried on that hillside we'll never find you. But that pine growth may protect you a little and I know where it is. Get your skis off. When the avalanche comes make constant swimming motions. It may help you keep near the top. And keep one pole free so that you can push it up. It'll give you some air and we'll be able to find you more easily when we come back for you. Hurry, man there's not a moment to lose!"

McGrath reached up and pulled his goggles down over his eyes. He smiled at Jericho, a wide white smile. "You're out of your mind," he said. "I'm getting out of here!"

McGrath gave a great, powerful push with his poles. Jericho watched him, the big man still as a statue. The bumbling beginner was gone, and the matchless skill of the expert had taken over.

Jericho saw a beautifully executed short-stem turn and then a wedeln, starting in a slow schuss into a series of hopping turns.

Jericho watched the man racing down the hill, varying the length of his traverses and the arc of his turns, controlling his speed, swinging past obstacles, picking the best terrain for each maneuver with the mastery of an expert.

Jericho heaved a deep sigh and started down the hill himself, slowly, snowplowing, following the track made by McGrath.

When he reached the bottom of the hill he saw Val, her goggles raised, staring open-mouthed at McGrath who was urging her to take cover in the woods.

Jericho reached them, jammed his poles into the snow, and bent to unfasten his bindings. He stepped out of his skis.

"We can't just stand here," McGrath said sharply. He looked up the hill, frowning. "Let's get into the woods!"

"No need," Jericho said.

"Ever see an avalanche?" McGrath shouted at him.

"There is no avalanche," Jericho said. "I invented it, Herr Huber."

The dark-tinted goggles of the man in the fur parka remained fixed steadily on Jericho. Except for the sharp intake of Val's breath there was no sound. Even the dark pine woods seemed to be listening.

"Man of many faces," Jericho said quietly. He leaned on one of his ski poles. His red beard was powdered with white snow. "That implies a master of disguise, Herr Huber. Your vacuous clowning fooled me until a few minutes ago. I watched you coming up the hill with Val. You fell and fell and fell again. Too many times, Herr Huber. I became aware of the instinctive

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grace of those falls. And then it occurred to me: 'How could an expert skier best hide himself?' By playing the fool, by being so obviously a rank beginner that he would be brushed off any suspect list from the start. The avalanche was a device to rip off your mask."

Jericho glanced at the girl. "What happened, Val? Did you tell him Carl's story and did he persuade you to come out here to look for him?"

She gave him a frozen nod. "Where is Carl?"

"Safe. He'll be turning up soon."

"I'm truly sorry about this," Huber said. A gloved hand came out of the pocket of his parka; it held a compact, black automatic. "I'm only interested in Kramer," but you two have got in the way."

The automatic wavered between Jericho and Val.

Jericho shifted his weight—a small movement. Then, suddenly, his ski pole, hurled like a javelin, buried its sharp point in Huber's throat.

The assassin screamed, and as he fell backward the gun went off, echoing upward. And then Jericho's two-hundred-and forty pounds landed on Huber, and the gun was ripped away and thrown into the soft snow. Huber lay still, moaning.

Jericho, sitting on the man's chest, glanced up the hill. "Take it easy, Val," he said. "The gun shot will bring him."

Coming down the hill in a beautiful series of wedelns of his own was Carl Kramer. The pastel girl hurried forward to meet him. Jericho wondered if there was any way to get that almost primitive eagerness into a painting. It would take genius.

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a new Grandfather story

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**LLOYD BIGGLE, JR.**
TITLE:	***The Great Alma Mater Mystery***
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVE:	Grandfather Rastin
LOCALES:	Wiston and Borgville, Michigan
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*One of Grandfather's finest cases—the old gumshoe!—light-hearted, ingenious, and set against the always interesting background of a college campus . . .*

WHEN MR. OBERMEYER, WHO is principal of the Borgville High School, yanked me out of my history class to talk on the telephone with Sheriff Pilkins, I knew right away it had something to do with the way I drive my jalopy. I thought about it all the way to the principal's office, but as near as I could remember I hadn't run through a stop sign for at least three weeks, and reckless driving and speeding were out of the question. There are one or two laws that my jalopy might be tempted to violate, but the worst intentions in the world wouldn't make a speeder out of it. As for reckless driving, my Grandfather Rastin has said more than once that merely backing that car out of the garage constitutes reckless driving, but I don't think he meant it the way the law does.

Mrs. Dobson, who is Mr. Obermeyer's secretary, was standing by the counter holding the telephone. She handed it to me, and she and Mr. Obermeyer cocked their ears and waited.

"Where's your Grandfather?" Sheriff Pilkins shouted.

I relaxed. "Oh," I said. "Is that all?"

"Isn't that enough?" the Sheriff asked.

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"He's at Professor Alford's house in Wiston," I said.

"That's what you think. Where was he going from there?"

"He wasn't going anywhere from there. I took him there this morning, before school, and I'm supposed to pick him up right after school."

"Ha!" the Sheriff said. And hung up.

I held onto the telephone for a few seconds, making up my mind, and then I hung up. "Emergency!" I said to Mr. Obermeyer, and got out of there before he could start asking questions. I looked back as I went down the walk to the parking lot, and saw Mr. Obermeyer watching me out of the window, trying to make up his mind whether my action constituted what he liked to call "a serious breach of discipline," or whether it was just bad manners. The next day I found out what he decided, but that's another story.

I drove directly to Professor Alford's house, which is a big old place near the Wiston College campus. Mrs. Alford was talking on the telephone, but she didn't have any trouble handling a conversation with me at the same time. She told me she'd just got home, but she thought Professor Alford had taken Grandfather over to the college.

"Everything is in a turmoil around here," she said. "Professor Pritchard was murdered this morning."

"Gosh!" I said. "That's probably why Sheriff Pilkins—"

"He's in a coma, and I don't think he's expected to live."

"*Sheriff Pilkins?* But I just talked with him—"

"Professor Pritchard. He has a fractured skull."

I thanked her over my shoulder as I was going out the door, which was probably another serious breach of discipline. But I just don't know how to go about making conversation with a woman who says someone's been murdered and isn't expected to live.

I found Grandfather standing on the steps of the Wiston College Science Building. Under his arm he had a shiny leather brief case that I knew didn't belong to him, and he was holding it as if it were something he'd shoplifted and would like to return.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"Sheriff Pilkins called me at school," I said. "He wanted to know where you were. I think he's going to arrest you."

"Horsefeathers! Pilkins is an idiot."

"Sure. I thought I'd better tip you off, and find out if you'll need a lawyer."

Grandfather told me one or two things I hadn't heard before about what he thought of Sheriff Pilkins, but was interrupted by a student who galloped up and handed him a stack of papers. Grandfather stuffed

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the papers into the brief case. The student dashed into the Science Building, and Grandfather followed him. Another student was standing nearby, taking it all in, and I asked him what was going on.

"Beats me," he said. "They're making some kind of survey."

"What are they surveying?" I asked.

He laughed, and said a couple of thousand people were trying to figure that one out. He hurried off after a coed who didn't seem to know him nearly as well as he seemed to know her, and I went into the Science Building.

Grandfather was waiting by the open door of a classroom. The teacher was reading something, and the student who'd handed Grandfather the papers was standing by looking as if he'd just presented a summons. The teacher laughed, and said to the class, "Ladies and gentlemen, President Channing insists that I administer a Loyalty Test. Take paper, please. Write your name and residence, this class—which in case you've forgotten is Physics 103—and my name, which has been Mr. Stevenson all semester. Below that you will write the words of the Wiston College Alma Mater. All three verses."

Someone in the back of the room started to sing the Alma Mater, and the whole class took it up. Mr. Stevenson rapped for order. "No talking—or singing," he said. "The instructions say I am to administer this test as severely as I would a final examination. I would very much regret having to flunk one of you for cheating on the words of the Alma Mater."

"We took this Loyalty Test last hour," a girl said.

"Then you will take it again this hour," Mr. Stevenson said. "The instructions say everyone, including the instructor." He sat down and started to write.

Grandfather moved on, and I followed him. "If it's the words to the Alma Mater you want, you didn't need to bother all these people," I told him. "I've sung them myself at least a thousand times, and I think I could even give them to you backwards, if that'll help any."

Grandfather stopped and looked at me. "That's an idea," he said. He fished a blank piece of paper from the brief case. "Here—put your name at the top and write down the words. All three verses."

"Backwards?" I asked.

He walked away without saying anything, and I put the paper up against the wall, and wrote, but not backwards:

Hail to Wiston College! Hail!
Alma Mater fair and strong,
Old in wisdom, young in courage,
You we praise in deed and song.

Watch! As down your hallowed pathways,
'Neath the unfurled banners bright,

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Wiston's valiant sons come marching,
Soon to put their foes to flight.

Hail to Wiston College! Hail!
Honored may you live, and long,
Old in wisdom, young in courage,
You we praise in deed and song.

The bell rang as I was finishing, and students erupted from the classrooms and nearly knocked me off my feet. I fought my way upstream, and finally got clear to chase after Grandfather. He'd met Professor Alford, the head of Wiston's Psychology Department, in front of the building. Students were coming from all directions to hand papers to Grandfather, and he was stuffing them into the brief case.

"Have we got everyone?" he asked.

"No," Professor Alford said, giving his goatee a couple of tugs. "But we got everyone who's had a class during the last three hours, and just about all the specials. We'll do a repeat tomorrow morning, and *that* should get almost everybody."

"Tomorrow will be too late," Grandfather said. A janitor was moving slowly along the walk, carrying a ladder. Grandafther pointed. "What about him?"

Professor Alford nodded at one of the students. "Cover the custodians," he said. The student picked a couple of assistants, and went loping off.

"And what about him?" I asked, pointing to another man who was hurrying toward us. It was Sheriff Pilkins.

The Sheriff made a tactical error that was unusual even for him. He started bellowing at Grandfather when he was too far away for us to make out what he was saying; and then when he came within range he was too winded to do anything but pant loudly.

He finally managed a question. "Where is it?"

Grandfather nodded at Professor Alford, and Professor Alford took a folded slip of paper from his inside pocket and handed it to the Sheriff. The Sheriff glanced at it, glanced a second time, looked at Professor Alford, turned to look at Grandfather. "Is this all?"

"What did you expect?" Grandfather asked. "A signed confession?"

The Sheriff didn't say anything.

"Don't you recognize it?" Grandfather asked.

"Can't say that I do."

"This is no place to talk," Professor Alford said. "Let's go over to my office."

We headed for the Psychology Department, with Sheriff Pilkins trailing along with more determination than enthusiasm. Professor Alford turned Grandfather's brief case over to the students and took Grandfather and the Sheriff and me into his office. He found chairs for all of us, and sat down at his desk

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and tilted back with a big grin on his face.

"One of the neighbor women found that paper behind a chair cushion after they took Pritchard away. She was cleaning the place up, and there was plenty of cleaning to do. He bled quite a lot, as you may have noticed. Anyway, my wife was there helping out, and she sent it over to me to figure out if it had anything to do with the assault on Pritchard."

"It wouldn't occur to her that I might be interested," the Sheriff grumbled. "I didn't hear about it until this afternoon, and we've wasted—"

Professor Alford interrupted. "Oh, she knew you'd be interested, but she wasn't sure you'd know what to do with it," he said, and went right on grinning.

"Thanks!"

"What *would* you have done with it? Or, now that you have it, what are you going to do with it?"

The Sheriff took out the paper and unfolded it. "Well, there's the handwriting—"

"Obviously disguised."

"Fingerprints—"

"A couple of dozen people have handled it, including you."

The Sheriff dropped it like a hot potato, and picked it up again, carefully, by one corner. He scratched his head while giving the paper a long careful look. That time I managed a look for myself. Someone who was obviously in a hurry and couldn't write very well anyway had scribbled, *Dishonored will you die and fast.*

"You still don't recognize it?" Professor Alford asked.

Sheriff Pilkins shook his head.

"Do you know the words of the Wiston College Alma Mater?"

The Sheriff snorted. "Who doesn't?"

"Exactly. Who doesn't? I didn't see the connection myself, but Rastin did. Third stanza, second line. 'Honored may you live, and long.' It poses a couple of intriguing questions."

"What sort of questions?" the Sheriff asked, scratching his head again.

"For one thing, Professor Pritchard wrote the Alma Mater. Did his attacker know that, or was he just making a play on words?"

"I thought that fellow Mueller wrote the Alma Mater song."

"Professor Mueller wrote the music. Pritchard wrote the words. And then—the change from *long* to *fast* is understandable, and of course *honored* to *dishonored* and *live* to *die*, but we were intrigued by the change from *may* to *will*."

"Seems to me he was just saying what he meant," Sheriff Pilkins said.

"Perhaps. But it wasn't a *necessary* change, and since there is obviously an intention to paraphrase that line of the Alma Mater it does seem strange. Rastin thought there was a possibility that the person who wrote this wasn't familiar with

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the words of the Alma Mater—hadn't learned it correctly—or he would have written, 'Dishonored may you die and fast.' So we've spent the afternoon following up that idea."

"Following it up how?" the Sheriff asked.

"We've been trying to find out how many people around Wiston and environs don't know the words of the Alma Mater."

"There isn't anyone," the Sheriff said. "No one in this part of the state could help learning that thing. Do you have any idea how many times a year—"

Professor Alford was still grinning. "A fairly good idea. Every athletic event, every college program, every ceremony has the Alma Mater sung once and sometimes twice. Every radio station in these parts plays it several hundred times a year. Every fraternity and sorority house has a recording, and so do half the students who aren't fraternity or sorority members. Not only that, but it's a catchy tune and a wonderful barbershop quartet number. I've heard the thing as many as a dozen times in one evening over at The Broken Pretzel. The kids like to sing it, and so do the townspeople. There shouldn't be anyone in these parts who doesn't know the thing, but the fact remains that someone wrote *will you* instead of *may you*. As I said, it's intriguing. We aren't claiming any more than that for it."

"I see," the Sheriff said, looking at the piece of paper again. "If you find someone who thinks the words are *will you* instead of *may you*, then that might be the person I'm looking for."

"Perhaps. We really don't expect anything that dramatic, though—at least, I don't. Rastin never says much about what he expects, but then—you know Rastin."

"You're darned right I know him," Sheriff Pilkins said. "Well—thanks for the help. You'll let me know right away if you come up with anything?"

"Right away," Professor Alford promised.

The Sheriff shook hands with him, scowled at Grandfather, and left. Grandfather didn't even bother to scowl back at him, and you may have noticed that during the entire conversation he never said a word. To me this was more intriguing than all that *may you—will you* business.

Professor Alford got his pipe lit, tilted his chair again, and aimed a cloud of smoke at the ceiling. "Poor Pritchard. He's an opinionated crank, but basically harmless. Who could have done such a vicious thing to him?"

"You're the psychologist," Grandfather said.

"Find me the person who did it and I'll analyze his psychology for you."

"Incidentally, Pilkins might come storming back here to call you a liar. Are you a liar?"

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"I don't recall any recent indulgence in mendacity. Why?"

"Then you didn't know that *Mrs.* Pritchard wrote the words to the Alma Mater?"

Professor Alford snapped forward and dropped his pipe. It spilled hot ashes all over his desk blotter, but he didn't even notice. "*Madge* Pritchard wrote those words? Where'd you ever get an idea like that?"

"Professor Mueller told me. Mrs. Pritchard wrote the poem, and he set it to music, and the copyist wrote down only the last names of the composer and poet. When the thing got to be a hit, everyone just assumed that Professor Pritchard was the author, him being a professor of English and all. He's been taking bows for it ever since."

The blotter started to smoke in a dozen places, and Professor Alford noticed the ashes. He mashed them out and leaned back trying to puff on an empty pipe. "As the philosopher said, learn one new thing each day and you'll stay young. I haven't felt so youthful in years. I do recall hearing something about Madge Pritchard dabbling in poetry. Not that it really matters—or does it?"

"Pilkins would think it does," Grandfather said. "By his idiotic reasoning it provides a motive."

"Madge meditated on the injustice for twenty years, and then she used a poker on her husband? Not even Pilkins would swallow that!"

"Look at the note. 'Dishonored will you die.' Pritchard would be dishonored if the truth got around, wouldn't he?"

"He certainly would," Professor Alford admitted.

"So the note may be a significant clue," Grandfather persisted. "Given a clue, and a strong motive that fits it, all Pilkins has to prove is opportunity. Who had the best opportunity?"

"I suppose Madge did," Professor Alford said, still puffing on the empty pipe.

"Right," Grandfather nodded. "Pritchard was working in his study. Mrs. Pritchard was in the garden digging up her tulip bulbs. She claims she had her back to the house, but I had a look at the place she was digging. Either she was facing the house, or she was reaching around a rosebush, which is not only inconvenient, but hazardous. The attacker was interrupted when your wife rang the doorbell. The attacker forced open a French door that hadn't been used for years, which must have made some noise, and jumped out not forty feet from where Mrs. Pritchard was digging up bulbs, and she didn't see or hear anything—she says. I'm wondering how long it will take Pilkins to decide that she dug up a few bulbs to give herself an alibi, went into the house to whack her husband, was interrupted by the doorbell, and left through the French door herself."

"I can't believe it," Alford said.

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"Why was your wife calling on the Pritchards this morning?"

"Madge invited her over."

"It fits," Grandfather said. "Mrs. Pritchard set the stage very nicely. Your wife would ring the bell, walk in anyway when no one answered, and find the body. Only the timing was messed up, and your wife got there before Pritchard was entirely dead. It's as good a case as Pilkins has ever had."

"Nuts to Pilkins. Do *you* think Madge Pritchard would try to kill her husband because twenty years ago he took the credit for a poem she wrote?"

Grandfather snorted. "How long have they been married?"

"Thirty years, at least."

"In thirty years any husband gives his wife at least a hundred reasons for murdering him, if she wants to take them that way. Let's go have another look at the place."

My jalopy was in the parking lot on the other side of the campus, and I didn't catch up with Grandfather and Professor Alford until they were almost at Pritchards'. Then when I saw the traffic jam in front of the house I was afraid I might have to go back to the campus to find a parking place. Professor Alford drove right into the driveway, so I followed him, and sat in the car for a moment to see if anyone would object.

From the front the house looked like something swiped from a southern plantation, and from the side and back it looked as if the guy who stole the front should have gone back for the rest of it. We cut across the lawn, and pushed through a crowd of people on the big front porch. The only men there were a deputy sheriff and a slick little fellow with a mustache.

Professor Alford nudged me when he saw him. "That's Professor Labey," he whispered. "If Pritchard dies, he'll be head of the English Department."

"Does that make him a suspect?" I whispered back.

Professor Alford laughed. "You and your Grandfather—"

Mrs. Alford met us at the front door. Her face was white, but she hadn't been frightened by anything. She was just doggone mad.

"The Sheriff wants to arrest Madge!" she said.

"It must be that new deputy, the college fellow," Grandfather said. "Pilkins couldn't possibly be this efficient on his own hook."

"What are we going to do?" Mrs. Alford asked. "Madge was just getting over the shock of what happened this morning, and now she's broken down completely."

"Have her doctor tell Pilkins to go soak his head," Grandfather said.

"I already did, but the Sheriff has one of his deputies sitting on a chair right outside her door. He wanted him in the room—said she might try to commit suicide. The idea!"

"Is there any word about Profes-

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sor Pritchard?" Grandfather asked.

"Just that he's still unconscious."

"Where's Pilkins now?"

"I don't know, but I'll tell you one thing. He's keeping out of *my* way."

We went into the living room, where Professor Pritchard's niece Marcia, a Wiston College student, was sitting glumly on the sofa with her fiancé. Mrs. Alford introduced us, and the two of them nodded and went right on looking glum. Professor Alford was called to the telephone, and he came back talking to himself, which is not usual for him.

"They've finished checking over the whole batch," he said.

"The whole batch of what?" Grandfather asked.

"That test you and I spent the entire afternoon running. They didn't find a single mistake in the crucial line—which is all they were looking at."

"Oh. I'd forgotten all about it."

"So had I, after your very convincing analysis. Would you mind telling me why we went to all that trouble when you already had this thing figured out?"

"I don't know. I guess my mind can be perverse in several directions at the same time."

"It certainly can."

"Say, you two," Grandfather said, "do you know the words to the Wiston College Alma Mater?"

Marcia Pritchard and her fiancé, who was a moderately homely young man named John Wickel, looked up and stared at Grandfather. I should add that Marcia Pritchard was not about to win any beauty contests, though she seemed like a nice girl. They turned to look at each other, and then they laughed and started to sing.

"All right," Grandfather said. "Skip it."

"Are you asking a *music major* at Wiston if he knows the Alma Mater?" John Wickel asked. "Do you have any idea how often—"

"I said skip it."

"You aren't being consistent," Professor Alford said. "There's no reason why they shouldn't take the test."

"Then you give it to them," Grandfather said. "I'm going to look around."

I followed him out of the front door, and we circled the house, walking slowly. "If Professor Pritchard regains consciousness, maybe he'll be able to tell who it was," I said.

"Maybe," Grandfather said, "but they're not counting on it. They think he was clobbered from behind."

"Is Mrs. Pritchard strong enough to beat up a man that way?"

"I'd say she is. True, she isn't very tall, but she's well-developed in other directions."

We walked over to look at the rosebush, and I saw right away what Grandfather meant. It was only a young one, but if Mrs.

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Pritchard had her back to the house she was either reaching around the bush or sitting on it. I tried it both ways, and I can offer testimony to the effect that a young rosebush can be just as prickly as an old one.

Mrs. Alford saw us, and came out to investigate. "Is it possible that Madge did it?" she asked.

"I guess it's possible," Grandfather said. "Whatever happened, she certainly didn't use her head. All she had to do was tell Pilkins she saw a stranger disappearing around the corner of the house, and Pilkins would have run in circles for a month trying to catch him."

"What's this about giving Marcia and John a test?"

"To find out if they know the words to the Wiston College Alma Mater."

"Of course they know the words! They're Wiston students, aren't they? John is a brilliant music student. He plays first trumpet in the band and orchestra, and the orchestra is going to play a composition of his on its Christmas concert."

They went on talking, but I lost interest because at that moment I saw Sheriff Pilkins playing Indian. There were several big lilac bushes scattered about, and separating the Pritchard yard from the next one was a thick hedge. Sheriff Pilkins went sneaking from lilac bush to lilac bush, and when he got close to the hedge he pounced.

"Got you!" he shouted.

"What in the world!" Mrs. Alford exclaimed. "Why, it's Professor Klotz!"

"Right," Sheriff Pilkins said. "We've been looking for him all day. He's the third corner in as neat a triangle as you've ever seen. His wife died a couple of years ago, and his living next door to the Pritchards gave him plenty of opportunity to get mighty friendly with Mrs. Pritchard. Right, Klotz?"

This Professor Klotz looked more like an automobile mechanic than a professor, and if Sheriff Pilkins had some idea of frightening him into a confession, he'd picked the wrong man. Professor Klotz shook off the Sheriff's hand, brushed his sleeve a couple of times, and said, "Nonsense."

"Either Mrs. Pritchard did it herself, or she's covering up for someone," the Sheriff said. "Neighbor on the other side of Klotz saw him coming through the hedge this morning, just about the time Mrs. Alford was ringing the Pritchards' doorbell."

"Nonsense," Professor Klotz said again.

"Do you know the words to the Wiston College Alma Mater?" Grandfather asked him.

"Of course," he said. "Who doesn't?"

"You might test him on it," Grandfather told the Sheriff.

"I will," Sheriff Pilkins promised. "Come along, Klotz. We're going to have a nice long talk."

The Sheriff marched him away,

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and Mrs. Alford said, "Now if that isn't the most ridiculous thing—both of them over fifty, and the Sheriff thinks he's found a triangle!"

"People never get too old to make fools of themselves," Grandfather said.

We went back to the house. Grandfather stayed in the kitchen to talk with Mrs. Alford, and I went to the living room to see how Professor Alford was making out with his tests. He handed the papers to me.

"Flying colors," he said.

I looked. Both of them had written, "Honored may you live," but if they were pleased at having passed the test they didn't show it. They were holding hands and looking as glum as they had before.

I took the papers to Grandfather, and told him they tested loyal. He nodded, and stuffed them into a pocket without looking at them. I went back down the hall to investigate the scene of the crime, which was Professor Pritchard's study.

The Professor's desk placed him with his back to the door, and the rack by the fireplace was real handy in case a murderer forgot to bring his own weapon. The poker was missing, but there were a couple of other gadgets that would have served just as well. The French door looked out onto the back yard, and from the study window I could see the rosebush.

I turned away just in time to see Mrs. Pritchard coming down the stairs. The deputy was right on her heels, but she wasn't paying any attention to him. She was wearing a wrinkled housecoat, and her hair was a mess, and she didn't look like the kind of person who'd be holding down one end of a triangle. She looked like a stout little woman with problems.

At the bottom of the stairs she looked toward the living room, and then toward the kitchen, and then she said to me, "Where are they taking Howard?"

"Howard?" I said.

"Professor Klotz."

"Sheriff Pilkins just arrested him."

"The fools! All of them are fools! Roger is a fool, too."

She went into the living room, sat down, and buried her face in her hands.

I went back to the kitchen. "Who is Roger?" I asked.

"That's Professor Pritchard," Mrs. Alford said. "Why?"

"Mrs. Pritchard just said he's a fool."

"Did she? Oh, the poor dear!"—and she hurried away.

Grandfather went outside again to commune with the rosebush. Mrs. Alford got Mrs. Pritchard back upstairs, and then she came down and gave me a glass of milk and two small cookies, and since it was getting close to supper time I sat around feeling hungry and wondering how long it would be before

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Grandfather decided to give up and go home.

Grandfather returned to the kitchen just as Sheriff Pilkins came prowling through the place, back from third-degreeing Professor Klotz. The Sheriff exchanged glares with Mrs. Alford, and went out through the dining-room door. "Pritchard's regained consciousness," he said, over his shoulder. "He has a nasty fracture of the skull, but he'll recover."

"Can he talk?" Grandfather asked.

"He will talk. They won't let anyone see him yet. I have a man waiting at the hospital."

"Did you ask Klotz about the words of the Alma Mater?"

"He wrote it for me twice," the Sheriff said disgustedly. "In English and in German. The English is all right, and I'm taking his word for the German. He says he makes all his German students learn it in German. Fit *that* into your dratted theory!"

He banged the door after him, which wasn't absolutely necessary, and Grandfather took the two Loyalty Test papers from his pocket, glanced at them, and pocketed them again. I asked him if he still thought Mrs. Pritchard was the attacker.

"Seeing as how Pritchard is going to be all right," he said, "I'd like to forget the whole business. Arresting somebody for this just might create more problems than it solves."

"You won't have an easy time selling that idea to the Sheriff," I said.

"No, but I might be able to sell it to Pritchard. Let's find Professor Alford."

He was on the front porch talking with Professor Labey. "Just for the record," he was saying, "where were you at eleven fifteen this morning?"

"Walking home from class," Professor Labey said. "Why do you ask?"

"I'm collecting alibis."

"Is that so?" Professor Labey said, with a nasty grin. "And just where were you at eleven fifteen?"

"Lecturing to about fifty students," Professor Alford said.

"At least *you're* safe," Professor Labey said, still being nasty. "I hear Klotz bolted his ten o'clock German class this morning. Interesting, don't you think?"

"I heard he went home early with a headache."

"Did you? I heard that Pritchard had the headache."

Grandfather tugged at Professor Alford's arm. "Come on," he said.

"Where are we going?" Professor Alford asked, when we'd got away from the porch.

"To the Wiston Hospital. Know anyone there?"

"I know everyone there. Why?"

"I've got to talk with Pritchard before Pilkins gets to him."

"We can try, I suppose. Is it important?"

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"I've never done anything more important," Grandfather said.

"Let's go."

It wasn't easy. First, there was a nurse with a long nose and thick glasses who thought she was playing *Horatius at the Bridge*. Then there was a doctor who argued the case for fifteen minutes before he let slip the fact that Professor Pritchard wasn't his patient.

While we waited for someone to smoke out the professor's doctor, Grandfather slipped off by himself. He came back to report that a deputy sheriff named Steve Carling was roosting on a chair outside the professor's room. "If you haven't got a good, solid 'in' with the management," he told Professor Alford, "we might as well go home."

Eventually Professor Alford got hold of the right doctor by telephone and was referred to still another nurse. She went to have a peek at Professor Pritchard, and came back to tell us nothing doing. The professor was asleep.

We sat down to wait. The hospital's kitchen was just up the corridor, and every cart of food they were sending to the patients rolled right past my nose on its way to the elevator. I spent the next hour trying to figure out a way to get myself committed to the hospital in time to get some supper.

Professor Pritchard's doctor turned up about 6:30. Grandfather left the arguing to Professor Alford, interrupting only when the professor said five minutes with the patient would be enough.

"Two minutes," Grandfather said, "and all Pritchard will have to do is lie there and listen."

"It's against my better judgment," the doctor said. "Besides, I promised Sheriff Pilkins he'd be the first one to talk with the patient."

"How can you tell which is your better judgment?" Professor Alford asked, making like a psychologist.

The doctor grinned. "I'll only let one of you in."

"As far as I know," Grandfather said, "there's only one of me."

That took care of everything except Deputy Sheriff Steve Carling. When he found out that Grandfather was going to see Professor Pritchard, and he wasn't, he threw a noisy fit right there in the hospital corridor. I was surprised that the doctor didn't throw him out, because some of his remarks were not exactly sanitary.

Finally the deputy ran out of threats and had to telephone Sheriff Pilkins for a new supply, and the doctor took Grandfather into Professor Pritchard's room. I timed him, and I think the doctor did, too, because they came out right on the two minute mark.

"All right," Grandfather said. "We can go home now."

"What happened?" Professor Alford asked the doctor. "I know *he* won't tell me."

The doctor shrugged. "I was just

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there to make certain he didn't excite the patient. Besides, they whispered."

We took the elevator to the lobby and met Sheriff Pilkins at the front door. His face was as red as I've ever seen it, and he barged right past us without even blinking our way. The elevator was waiting, but he didn't seem to notice it. He tore across the lobby and took the stairs, three of them at the first step, and disappeared.

"The exercise will do him good," Grandfather said. "He's been putting on a little weight, and not in his head, where he needs it. They'll have to let him see Pritchard, so let's wait for him."

We sat down in the lobby, and about five minutes later, the Sheriff was back again, still using the stairs. He stopped when he saw us, and glared at Grandfather. "Bah!" he said. And left.

"Just what does that mean?" Professor Alford asked.

"It means," Grandfather said, "that the case is closed. Pritchard told him that he wouldn't sign a complaint, and if the Sheriff arrests anyone, no matter who it is, Pritchard will testify in court that it's the wrong person. Now let's *really* go home."

Late that night Professor Alford drove over to Borgville to see us. Grandfather had already gone to bed, but he came down in his nightshirt, told the professor to make himself at home, and brought him a bottle of cold beer.

"I know you don't usually make social calls after ten o'clock," he said. "What's on your mind?"

"I had a talk with Madge Pritchard," Professor Alford said. "She told me who did it. I thought you'd like to know."

"I already know."

Professor Alford sputtered all over the place and delayed the conversation while he did a dry-cleaning job on his goatee. "Who do you think it was?"

"I *know* it was John Wickel."

The professor sputtered again, though he hadn't taken any more beer. "How the devil did you figure it out?"

"Easy," Grandfather said. "I used our Loyalty Tests."

"But Wickel passed the test! He got every word right."

"Naturally. He wasn't in school this afternoon, but word about what we were doing got around fast. He guessed he'd slipped up somewhere, and by the time you gave him the test he'd had a chance to look up the words."

Professor Alford held his glass under his nose for a good minute without taking a drink. "That may make sense to you, but it doesn't to me. Go on."

"Don't you know what Wickel is studying?"

"Certainly. He's a music student."

"Right. Kind of a star music student. Plays a horn in the college

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band and orchestra. Do you need any more explanation?"

"I certainly do!"

"Think about it. Whenever the Alma Mater is sung at a college function, what's Wickel doing?"

Professor Alford didn't say anything.

"He's blowing on his horn, that's what he's doing. He's *played* the Alma Mater hundreds of times, but he's probably never *sung* the Alma Mater in his life. No wonder he got the words mixed up!"

"You devil, you!" Professor Alford took a fast gulp of beer, and had to dry his goatee again. "Pritchard disapproved of his niece's romance," he said. "He would. I doubt if he even understood young love when he was young. He was going to make her break her engagement, and he was also going to ship her off to a girl's college in the East. Wickel went to make a last appeal, and Pritchard ordered him out of the house. Young love being what it is, the poor kid lost his head. He really is a fine young man with a promising future, and he's feeling a lot worse about this than Pritchard does. Imprisoning him could easily ruin his life, and the niece's, too. Maybe even Pritchard's, because Madge would certainly never forgive him. Just by a twist of luck the doorbell rang with Pritchard only half killed. What did you say to him?"

"I asked him if he wanted his niece married to a jailbird and his wife arrested for obstructing justice. He didn't. I pointed out that for once in his life he had a chance to do something generous and he agreed. Maybe the poker knocked some sense into him. Now if you don't mind, I'm going to bed. Let him finish his beer before you throw him out, Johnny."

Grandfather went back upstairs. Professor Alford tried to drink his beer, but he had to stop to chuckle between swallows, and then he got to laughing so hard he couldn't swallow.

"Your Grandfather," he said, "is a remarkable person."

"Sure," I said. "He usually doesn't strike people as being that funny, though."

"But he is. I never thought I'd live to see the day, but he is. John Wickel used the poker—*but he didn't write that note.* He wouldn't have had time to write it if he'd wanted to. Madge Pritchard wrote it. She was in the back yard, talking with Klotz, when Wickel left by the French door. They got to Pritchard before my wife walked in, and understood what had happened, and decided to salvage what they could from the situation.

"Klotz hurried off to get hold of John Wickel, and tell him to calm down and act innocent and everything would be all right, and Madge tried to point the Sheriff in the wrong direction, only she was so rattled she botched the job. Her

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writing those words, under those circumstances, would make a wonderful psychological study, though unfortunately it couldn't be published. Your Grandfather—"

He drained his glass. "Poor Madge. She was in a turmoil all day because she didn't know what Pritchard would tell the Sheriff, and she was afraid if she insisted on seeing him first—alone—the Sheriff would be suspicious. She's ready to hang a medal on your Grandfather, and I'm going to enjoy this as long as I live. The only trouble is I'll never be able to share it with anyone. I'll give you five dollars, Johnny, if you'll promise not to tell him."

"You don't have to bribe me," I said. "I couldn't take your money."

"All right, Johnny. Word of honor, anyway. This is the best day I've had in years."

I showed him to the door, and then I tore up the stairs to see Grandfather. I hadn't promised the professor a thing, and I wasn't going to miss a chance to have a good laugh at Grandfather myself—only I wanted him to know about it.

I turned on the light, which made him bellow at me, and said, "About those words John Wickel mixed up—"

"I know," he said. "Madge Pritchard wrote them."

"You were listening!"

"Wasn't."

"Then how did you know?"

"After we came home I got to thinking. She was the only person of any consequence who didn't take the test. I wondered if maybe she'd got so sick of her poem she didn't remember the words any more. I called Professor Mueller. In her original version she wrote *will you*, but he thought it struck a false note so he changed it to *may you*. They had quite an argument about it at the time."

"Then why did you make up that fairy tale for Professor Alford?" I asked.

"I owed it to him," Grandfather said with a sigh. "I wasted a whole afternoon for him and his students, and maybe made him look ridiculous to the college administration, and he's entitled to some compensation. Psychologists are always happiest when they catch someone being brilliant but absolutely wrong, so I gave him something to be happy about. Anything else?"

"You haven't explained anything," I said. "If you knew John Wickel didn't write those words, how did you figure out he was the one who bashed Professor Pritchard?"

"Professor Pritchard told me," he said. "Now turn off the light and go to bed."

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TALES OF KARMESIN

Another new Karmesin caper—and always bear in mind that Karmesin is either the greatest criminal of all time—or (and whisper the words, don't dare shout them) the greatest liar of all time . . . but either way he is vastly entertaining.

KARMESIN TAKES PEN IN HAND

by GERALD KERSH

"I WONDER," I SAID TO KARMESIN, "why you don't write your life story, your memoirs."

Karmesin let loose one of his elephantine laughs—*Heeeeeeeeaaaghl*—and slapped me on the back.

"I don't see what there is to laugh at?"

Karmesin, still guffawing replied, "But I do. No, my young friend, I cannot write my life story. At least, I could write it—but I could never sell it."

"Of course you could."

"Not so, my enthusiastic young friend, not so. I have already sold it."

"To whom?" I asked.

"That is a story in itself," said Karmesin. He unraveled a little heap of cigarette ends and began to reroll them. "I am one of the few people who has made a hundred thousand out of an autobiography."

"A hundred thousand pounds!"

"Certainly—not shillings. I have made money out of literature. Did you ever hear of my publishing venture? The opposite of *Who's Who?* I called it *Nobodies.*"

"I never heard of it."

"Exactly."

"When was it published?"

"It never was."

"And when was your life story published?"

"It never was."

"Then I don't see—"

"My friend, you are a journalist, eh? Then I say to you: there is money in journalism, but more money is made out of writing that never sees the light."

"Will you explain all this?"

"Certainly," said Karmesin, poking out a tongue such as one usually sees on porcelain dishes in delicatessen shops and moistening the gummed edge of a cigarette paper . . .

My Directory (said Karmesin) was my first venture in publishing. That was in America—in 1913—or

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perhaps it was 1923. I was living in a town with the barbarous name of Loco City. It had been a bad man's town in the 1870's, a silver town, where millions were made and lost in a single day, and wild miners dashed down hatfuls of silver dollars in exchange for bogus drinks.

An eccentric millionaire—of the type of "Silver Dollar" Yates—had built the town on wild and rococo lines. There was an Opera House, for example, with an auditorium large enough to seat three times the population of Loco City. There was a bar built to resemble the famous old Horse Shoe Bar in Chicago; it was so long that you were drunk on the smell of drink before you walked from one end to the other.

But all that belonged to the past. In 1913—or was it 1923?—Loco City was populated by a new generation of townspeople: respectable middle-class American businessmen; estate agents who called themselves realtors; young men with rimless glasses who had forgotten how their grandfathers had loitered on corners displaying notched gun-butts and Bowie knives.

It was all very simple. I started the Stars and Stripes Publishing Company, Inc., and began a local Directory which I called *Nobodies*. I drew up the histories of Loco City families—it read like the Newgate Calendar. Then I had a series of potted biographies of Loco City celebrities, and put down exactly what they did when they went to Buyers and Association Conventions—how the President of the Loco City Bank had been seen escorting three intoxicated blondes in the streets of San Francisco; how another man, a buyer of mortgages, had been photographed wearing some lady's corset, trying to milk a mule into a champagne bottle in Memphis. It was very simple, I tell you, and very amusing.

I sent galley proofs of my Directory to the gentlemen concerned and they paid me *not* to include them. Then I started a Social Register, and the same people paid me to *be* included in its aristocratic columns; and then I left town with $50,000 in my pocket. I could have made similar sums in every city of the United States, only I got tired of the business.

I had a good idea for a variation of the Directory of Directors—an exclusive little volume called *Is Their Credit Good?*—a list of business failures, dead beats, and bankrupts. It is all very easy, as long as you don't cast aspersions on womanhood. But this is only to illustrate how easily money can be made out of literature . . .

I was speaking of my life story. That is something quite different. It was my last big coup. When I think of it, I am sad, my friend. It was Karmesin's Hundred Days—the last flicker of the greatest brain of the century . . . What a man I was then! What a brain I had! I was the Napoleon of Crime.

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So! In those days I used to know a publisher, a very good fellow who is now dead. He was something of a wild man. I helped him out of a scrape—something to do with a woman with red hair who used to wait for him in his own waiting room with a loaded revolver in her left hand and a small bottle of strychnine in her right, together with a bundle of incriminating letters.

It was a very nice little situation, most amusing . . . It was he who said to me, "My dear Karmesin, if you wrote your life story, you would make money out of it."

"How much?" I asked.

"Well, you might make five thousand dollars—a thousand pounds, or perhaps two thousand."

He did not know what manner of man I was, this unhappy publisher; he did not realize that he affronted me by even mentioning such small change, such birdseed! But I simply smiled and said, "You assume that I would bother to write a book for five—or maybe only *one* —thousand pounds?"

"We might commission it," he said.

"And what, exactly, does that mean?"

"It is the practice of most reputable publishers," he said, "to advance money before a book is written—that is, if they have confidence in the author."

"Oh," I said, and took him to lunch.

I bought him three pounds worth of food and drink, which took a bit of consuming at the prices of those days, and filled his mouth with a cigar as thick as your wrist . . . Have you got a cigarette? What was money to me then, anyway? Easy come, easy go. So I went away and thought.

I said to myself: *Just for fun, I will write a synopsis of my life story which I shall entitle: I HAVE STOLEN FIVE MILLION POUNDS.*

And I sat down, with a pad of cream-laid paper before me, and a pen with a wide nib.

I wish you could have seen that synopsis. It was superb. Beginning with my early childhood, it covered about fifty years of my life. There was a different crime on nearly every page. When there was no crime, there was a brilliant criminal idea. I explained every unsolved crime mystery since the year 1890, when I really got going in the business.

Most of what I said was true. The affair of Lombard's Bank, the silly business of the gas meter, the affair of the Schnitzelbank Bonds, the horrible story of how I nearly became involved in the Xarro Valley Massacre; how I stole the Crown Jewels of the Maharajah of Bhang by means of a pot of glue and three pennyworth of tape; what happened to the famous Tyrone Opals; how I smuggled the Guayacum Pearls into Paris in an artificial hump; how I sent a message and a

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diagram to an agent of mine through three countries in every one of which a regiment of police were on the lookout; the reason why Goltensnobf the Jelly King has a nervous tic in his right eye; what happened to the Fourth Consignment of Opium—I tell you, a million stories, each more ingenious than the last!

When I had finished, I found myself reading the synopsis with the liveliest interest—that is how good it was! I had succeeded in attracting my own attention, so that I put my outline down with a sigh, and thought: *What a man this Karmesin is—what a devil of a man!*

I tell you, there is no vanity like the vanity of authorship. I was piqued. My curiosity was aroused. I wanted to see exactly how the publishing world would receive the synopsis that I had been so enthralled with.

I went to a good typewriting agency and had one thousand copies made, which I then sent to every publisher in the United States, England, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Holland, Portugal, Spain, and Patagonia.

Then I waited to see who would offer me the most.

My first reply was from Kiljoy and Mudd of London. I had expected hysteria, and wild compliments. They said something like this:

Dear Sir,

We have read your synopsis (and so on, and so on) *which we find very entertaining.*

Although we are not in the habit of commissioning works of this sort, we might be prepared to make an exception in your case . . .

and went on, the imbeciles, to offer me £50 down, £25 on day of publication, and twopence a week for life—some such ridiculous nonsense! A royalty of .025 per cent on the first 500,000 copies—something like that. I don't remember—but it was very little.

I roared with rage and seized my heaviest walking stick. Then I stopped and laughed. It was really too funny. Me! Karmesin! The greatest of all criminals, and the most successful, to be offered £75 for the inside story of his fabulous and prodigious career! I laughed at the top of my voice, and put the letter in a drawer.

Soon more letters came. One offered me £15 down for the World Copyright. Another went so far as to suggest an advance of £100. The offers poured in. I got 716 replies, and the average down payment was £50.

I sent each one a letter saying: "Double your offer and I accept"—to see what they would do.

No good. They wouldn't. I circularized the publishing firms in other countries—you know I am a linguist. I got another 107 offers, in all kinds of little sums in pesos, cruzeiros, escudos, piastres, bolivars

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—God only knows what Noah's Ark of currency!

And then, do you know what?

I found that I had wasted six months of my valuable time in this infernal literary work! Six months! It is true, I was not hard pressed for money, and was merely amusing myself seeing what they would offer.

I awoke to the fact, however, that I was not properly appreciated anywhere in the world. I was disgusted with the literary profession. Publishers were not my type. No. Besides, why should I write my life story? Pfui! Am I society beauty? The devil I am! Bah. I said to myself: *My lad, you will write nothing more—ever!*

And I did not . . .

Karmesin furtively ate a piece of sugar.

I said to him, "But all this leads nowhere. You said you made money out of your life story. And now you say you abandoned the whole project. What is one to believe?"

With terrible dignity Karmesin looked at me and said, "Permit me, please, to finish what I was saying. I said that I would write nothing more. *Bon.* I also said to myself: *You shall be revenged, my friend, on these bookmen who treat you like an ordinary human being.*

"So I took my wide-nibbed pen in hand and wrote 823 letters accepting every offer that was made to me and—to cut a long story short—I received about £40,000 from the whole of the world's publishing business, for options on my life story."

"Which you never wrote, eh?"

"Quite."

"Hum," I said.

"And what the devil do you mean by 'hum,' may I ask?"

"It doesn't sound very likely."

"So. So-o-o. You mean, I am a liar?"

"No, Karmesin, I didn't say that . . . Besides, you said, at first, that you made a hundred thousand pounds. And now you say only forty thousand. What is one to think?"

"My young friend," said Karmesin, as one who reasons with a small child, "am I to remember every trifling sum of money I have made and spent? Am I a clerk? Am I a bookkeeper? Do I make a double entry in seven different kinds of ink every time I buy a pair of bootlaces? Forty thousand, fifty thousand, a hundred thousand —bah, bah, and bah! It is all birdseed, pocket money. What can you do with a hundred thousand pounds? Are you a millionaire with such a sum? No. Then what is the use of it? *Ptcha.* In my room there are six empty beer bottles. If you take them back to the store, we can get fourpence on each of them and buy a packet of cigarettes. Let us go . . ."

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James M. Ullman, author of the industrial espionage series for EQMM, writes in a simple, direct way—no frills, no fancy stuff, no pretentious similes, no far-fetched metaphors, no striking figures of speech. Now, some of you may not care for a style that is so simple and direct. But there's one thing we're sure you'll like: the sheer readability of Mr. Ullman's simple, direct approach . . .

DEAD RINGER

by JAMES M. ULLMAN

AT 8:35 ON A TUESDAY NIGHT A CAR veered crazily down a Chicago street and hit a man stepping off the curb. The vehicle didn't even slow down. It squealed around a corner and out of sight. The first witness to reach the victim ascertained immediately that he was dead. Credentials identified the victim as William Starwood.

An hour later a cruising photographer for the *Chicago Express*, responding to a radioed request from his City Room, stopped at the home of Starwood's mother in suburban Park Ridge, where he obtained a faded picture of the dead men.

The *Express* art department did its best to retouch the picture. The result was so bad, however, that the desk held it back until a hole opened up in the racing edition, the final edition of the day, which was shipped to newsstands at 7:30 a.m. for the dubious benefit of horse players anxious to peruse the morning line. Then it ran as a one-column cut adjoining the story of Starwood's death on a back page.

That might have been the end of it—except that when the original photograph was returned to the City Room from the composing room, the picture editor tossed it face up on a stack of other photographs. And a police reporter named Barney Lear happened by . . .

It was Lear's day off. He had lumbered into the City Room to collect his pay check. An immense bearlike man, Barney strolled down an aisle exchanging pleasantries with rewritemen, from whom Lear entertained a vast respect. In his 18 years with the *Express*, Lear had never written a word. Everything he learned, he telephoned or told in person to rewritemen, who transformed Lear's notes into the crisp, succinct, journalistic prose that appeared in print under Lear's byline.

As Lear passed the picture desk, he gazed down at the fuzzy likeness of the late William Starwood. Some-

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thing about the photograph made Lear pause. He picked up the photograph and studied it.

"Yeah," he said slowly, "it could be."

Photo in hand, Lear walked to Leo Moran, the city editor.

"Leo, who is this guy?"

"William Starwood, a bachelor. Lived alone in an apartment on the Near North Side. Last night he sat around a bar for a few hours and then started home. But a hit-and-run killed him as he crossed a street. Know him?"

"I might. Where'd we get this?"

"From his mother, in Park Ridge. She said her son was an 'investor', whatever that is. What's bugging you?"

"You remember the Abbott case?"

"Sure. Five years ago a society woman named Elvira Abbott was murdered in an apartment hotel. She was found tied to a chair, a bullet in her head, and her wall safe empty."

"Right. Well, you know my memory for faces. And Starwood's face rings a bell. I think this Starwood was a desk clerk at that apartment hotel. And at the time his name wasn't William Starwood. It was William Stull." Lear paused. "Leo," he asked, "will you authorize overtime for me today? And let me return this picture to Starwood's mother, to see if Starwood and Stull are the same man?"

"Go ahead. If a desk clerk at a hotel where an unsolved murder took place has changed his name and blossomed out as an 'investor,' we might have one helluva story. But if you're wrong," Moran added, "your overtime ends as soon as you radio in here to me."

Lear drove out to Park Ridge on the Northwest Expressway. The more he had studied the photograph, the surer he'd become that the man had been William Stull. Lear had particular reason to recall Stull. The day after the murder, Stull had tried unsuccessfully to throw Lear and some other reporters out of the hotel.

Elvira Abbott, the murdered woman, had lived in the hotel alone. She was estranged from her husband, Harry, who occupied the family mansion in a North Shore suburb. Infidelity had been rumored on both sides of the marriage, but neither party had sought divorce.

Mrs. Abbott was last seen alive at 4:00 o'clock on a Sunday afternoon, when she walked outside and dropped a letter into a mailbox on the corner. She could have used a mail chute on her hotel floor, but that had a later pickup. Police surmised that her haste to have the letter delivered was what had led to her death. A gang of hotel burglars had been active in the neighborhood. Elvira Abbott was known to keep a large amount of jewels in her safe. It was theorized that the thieves saw her leave the hotel and assumed she would be gone for some time;

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and that she surprised the thieves in her apartment when she returned almost immediately.

Her body was found shortly before 10:00 p.m. by her two nieces, Irene and Alice Abbott. Alice was 20 then; Irene was 22. The tired cliché, "madcap heiresses," had been applied to them in headlines more than once.

The girls, diminutive and deceptively demure blondes, collected traffic tickets the way some people collect stamps. They thrived on wild champagne parties and formed romantic liaisons with band leaders, athletes, and other minor celebrities. But their Aunt Elvira was fond of the girls; she had given them a key to her apartment, so they could spend a night in town with her whenever they wished.

The coroner reported that Elvira Abbott, shot in the head at close range with a .22, had died between 4:00 and 5:00 p.m. She had kept a weapon of that caliber in the apartment, but it was missing. Also missing were the jewels in the safe. Elvira had made the job easy for the thieves. An absent-minded woman, she had written the combination on a slip of paper and left it in a desk drawer. Some furniture was overturned, and Elvira had been bound to the chair with belts. The apartment's back door, which led to an alley service entrance, was found open.

The two Abbott girls were questioned and sent home. All members of the Abbott family had alibis for the time of the murder. Alice and Irene had been with a yachting party on Lake Michigan until 9:00 p.m. Elvira's husband, Harry, had been entertaining guests in the suburbs. Elvira died without a will, and Harry inherited her estate. And John Abbott, father of the girls, was in New York on business. John and Elvira had quarreled many times, mostly because of the way Elvira indulged his daughters when he tried to discipline them by cutting off their allowances.

Of course the Abbott girls had no need for allowances any more. Each, on reaching the age of 24, had inherited $1,000,000 from their late paternal grandfather.

Starwood's mother lived in an old but well kept brick bungalow which Lear appraised at about $20,000. He parked in the driveway, got out, and rang the front bell.

The woman who answered was tall, thin, and gray-haired.

"Mrs. Starwood? I'm from the *Express*. I've come to return your son's picture."

"Of course." She opened the door. Lear stepped inside and handed her the print.

"Sorry to bother you. But it's our job," Lear said.

"I understand."

"You hear any more from the police about the hit-and-run car?"

"They found it parked a few miles from the accident. They said

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some juveniles probably stole it for a joy ride." She shook her head. "How terrible . . ."

"This will be hard on you, won't it? If the house is mortgaged—"

"Oh, I'm all right. My son bought the house for me a year ago and paid cash for it. And I have my Social Security."

"That's good. Sorry, but I have to ask. Was your son ever an apartment hotel desk clerk named William Stull?"

Surprised and angry, the woman snapped, "You have your nerve! Get out, right now."

"Whatever you say. But if you throw me out, I'll come back with detectives. They'll ask the same question. I remember William Stull from the Abbott murder case. That picture looks like Stull to me. And if your name's Stull, your Social Security records will prove it."

The woman didn't reply for a few moments. She sat on a chair and clenched her fists. Then she said, "I was afraid someone would recognize him, after I gave your man my son's picture. I was upset, I wasn't thinking. A photographer from another paper, the *Journal*, came a few minutes later, but I didn't give *him* a picture. He asked some questions too. Why can't you reporters leave people alone?"

"Because the Abbott case is still unsolved. People will want to know why your son changed his name—and where he got his money."

"Well, I can't help you. My son was with me the entire afternoon of the murder and we had company. The police checked that at the time. And after he made some money, my son changed his name so he'd never be associated with the Abbott murder again."

"When did he make this money?"

"About six months later. Through an investment. But Bill never discussed his business with me. And when he said he wanted to buy me a house, I just accepted it. At my age, why shouldn't I?"

"Where did your son bank?"

"He didn't. He handled his financial affairs through a stockbroker, Peter Donnell. He's with Darby & Sons. I've never met Mr. Donnell, but he called this morning to express his sympathy. My attorney will go to his office tomorrow, to check on my son's account."

"Your son have any close friends?"

"No man friends. He did have plenty of girls—Bill always was popular with women. But he never stayed with the same girl for long. And he never brought them home to meet me. I think he was serious about a woman only once. He kept her letters, with a ribbon around them, in a little black box. I guess it's still in his apartment. I'll go over there tomorrow and look around."

"When did you last see those letters?"

"About the time," Stull's mother said, "the Abbott woman was murdered."

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When Lear walked outside, he found another car parked in the driveway behind his own. The driver, a chunky, bald, middle-aged man, was puffing on a cigar. Lear walked to the second car and said, "Hi, Chester. What brings you here?"

Chester Moon, crime reporter for the *Chicago Journal*, winked and replied, "Come off it, Barney. I'm not blind. I saw that picture in your paper. It's true, isn't it? The so-called William Starwood is really William Stull? The desk clerk at the hotel where Elvira Abbott got hers?"

"There was a resemblance," Lear admitted, "but it's a false lead. The dead guy was really named Starwood. His mother just showed me his birth certificate. She's all broken up, though, so if I were you I wouldn't disturb her now. If you insist on seeing her, why don't you drop around tomorrow, when she feels better?"

"That's considerate of you. But if you don't mind, I'll check now. Our paper, you know, offered a five-grand reward for the Abbott killer. I'd sure be in trouble if *you* collected that reward." Moon started his car's engine. "I'll back up, pal, so you can pull out. And then I'm going inside."

As Lear's car swung down a ramp and back onto the expressway, Lear reached under the dashboard for a microphone. He made contact with Leo Moran at the *Express* city desk.

"Leo? The mother confirmed that Starwood was William Stull. But we have competition. Chester Moon of the *Journal* spotted the picture too. He walked in to see the mother as I walked out."

"Bad break. Where you going now?"

"First, to Stull's apartment in town. Then I'll call on a stockbroker named Peter Donnell. After that I'll head back to the office. I should check in by twelve thirty."

"Okay. That'll give us plenty of time before deadline. And while you're on the prowl, I'll call the hit-and-run squad again. Anything else?"

"Yeah. If our financial editor's around, let me talk to him."

A moment later the financial editor drawled, "Hi, Barney. How can I help in the war against crime?"

"Can you find out where the Abbott family does its banking?"

"No problem. Harry and John are both stockholders and directors of the Midwest National. No Abbott would dare bank anywhere else."

"Swell. Now, could you get some friend of yours at the bank to do a little snooping?—to see if any of the Abbotts have been making unexplained withdrawals?"

"That request," the financial editor said, "is irregular, immoral, and probably illegal. But a vice-president over there does owe the *Express* a favor. So I'll see what I can do."

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Lear squeezed his car into a parking place on a Near North Side street and entered the vestibule of Stull's apartment building. He pushed the button marked "Superintendent."

The super, a scowling, potbellied man in dungarees and a blue shirt, emerged from a basement apartment. He opened the inner door. Lear displayed his press pass.

"I'm from the *Express*. I wanted to ask about this man Starwood, who was killed by a car last night."

The super said, "Listen, fella. I'm sick and tired of talking about Starwood. You're the fourth guy to come around."

"No kidding. Who were the others?"

"Last night, a detective from hit-and-run. An hour ago, a reporter from the *Journal* named Moon. And after him, an investigator from an insurance company. The investigator talked me into letting him in Starwood's apartment, so why don't you go up to 205 and talk to him? I got other things to do."

Lear hiked up to the second floor. The door to 205 was open. Lear walked in. A dark-haired, broad-shouldered man, about 35 years old, was reclining in a chair, thoughtfully smoking a cigarette. He looked up and smiled.

"Hello, Barney. The super told me Moon had been here earlier. So I figured you'd be along any minute."

The man was Mike O'Brien, investigator for a group of insurance companies that had held policies on Elvira Abbott's life and on the jewels stolen from her safe. For years Lear had been cultivating O'Brien as a source for crime news.

"Hi, Mike. So you saw the picture too."

"Yep. This morning I stole what was left of my *Express* from my six kids, opened it over the breakfast table, and there he was—a dead ringer for William Stull. I'd questioned all the hotel employees at the time and figured this was worth checking. I see you and Moon figured the same."

"Learn anything?"

"From Starwood's papers, only that he did a lot of business with a broker named Peter Donnell. But the super told me that while Starwood had no apparent source of income, he never lacked for cash. And Starwood was highly secretive about his past. Which makes me damn curious to know more about him."

"Well, Starwood *was* Stull. His mother admitted it to me. Mike, when you poked around here, did you spot a black strongbox? Supposedly, Stull had love letters in it."

"No. But the super said this apartment was burglarized a few days ago. The rear door was forced. The super discovered it. Then Starwood walked in, looked around, and said nothing was missing. He told the super not to bother calling the police. But the super said Starwood

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seemed upset. And isn't *that* a funny set of circumstances?"

O'Brien stubbed out his cigarette. "Our companies," he went on, "took a real beating on the Abbott case. Elvira had a two-hundred-and-fifty thousand dollar policy on her life. Her husband paid the premiums, but Elvira got sore at him and made Alice and Irene her beneficiaries. We can't do much about *that*. But we also insured the missing jewels for two hundred grand more. And from the way things are shaping up, I'm beginning to think Stull knew who got those jewels. His way of life since the murder hints strongly of blackmail."

"It sure does. You talked to the police yet?"

"No, but I will. Also, to the Abbotts. And I want a few words with this stockbroker, Donnell."

"So do I. Let's hit him together." Lear winked. "When we see him, just introduce me as Mr. Lear. That way, if he assumes I'm another insurance investigator, it won't be anyone's fault. I have a hunch he'll talk more freely if he doesn't know I'm a reporter."

Nervously, Peter Donnell tapped a cigarette against his wrist. He lit it and leaned back. He was a thin, bespectacled, dapper man, with blond hair and a hairline mustache. Lear and Mike O'Brien sat across Donnell's desk in the Loop brokerage office of Darby & Sons.

"I'm afraid," Donnell confessed, "I knew all along that William Starwood was William Stull. I've known Bill casually since the Korean War. We were in the same outfit. He looked me up after the war and opened a small account. Then a few years ago he walked in here with a bank draft for ten thousand dollars made out to William Starwood. He said he'd received an inheritance and had changed his name."

O'Brien asked, "Didn't that make you suspicious?"

"Of what? I'm a broker, not a policeman. If a man wants to change his name, that's his business. Bill had told me he worked at the hotel where the Abbott woman was murdered. But I had no reason to suspect him of any connection with the crime. And apparently," he added, "neither did you, nor the police."

"Stull's mother," Lear said, "claims her son transacted all his personal financial business through your firm."

"That's right. When he needed cash, he'd go to the cashier and draw some from his account. The cash balance varied, of course, depending on how much stock he bought or sold. But after the original ten-thousand deposit, he walked in here the second of each month with another one thousand dollars; so he has deposited twelve thousand each year for the past five years. The only unusual activity occurred when he sold a lot of stock and withdrew a large sum to buy a home for his mother."

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"How much in the account now?"

"About two thousand in cash and nine thousand in stocks." Donnell paused. "Bill did say, a few weeks ago, that he hoped to increase his income in the near future. But I have no idea what he meant."

"Well, thanks," Lear said. He rose.

"I'm quite willing to cooperate with you gentlemen," Donnell added. "And with the police. But whatever you do, please don't give my name to the newspapers!"

Lear went back to the *Express*. He sat down with Leo Moran and told the city editor all he had learned to date.

Moran nodded. "We're on to something, all right. The financial editor's pal at the bank just called. He said Irene Abbott has been withdrawing two thousand in cash from her checking account each month. Ever since the time you say Stull began giving his broker a thousand a month. Incidentally, the financial editor told me to warn you. The Abbott girls are developing a reputation in business circles for being pretty sharp with a buck. Apparently, since inheriting their first millions, they've quietly backed several successful ventures."

"Well, we can't admit to the Abbotts that we've been prying into their bank accounts. We'll have to give the tip to the police and then move in."

"It's ticklish, Barney. The Abbotts are an important family. And they all had alibis for Elvira's murder. We checked hit-and-run, by the way. The cops still think a juvenile delinquent drove that car. Their only lead is, the driver tore his right hip trouser pocket on a spring that stuck out of the front seat. It was an old heap and the upholstery was worn. The crime lab found a button and a hunk of cloth on the spring."

"While you sit here and decide how we'll play this," Lear said, "I'll grab lunch."

Lear took his time eating. He returned to his desk and made a few routine phone calls. He was about to dial a friend at Homicide when Leo Moran walked up and said, "Hey, Barney, the managing editor wants to see both of us in his office. Right now."

"What's wrong?"

"The Abbotts are in there with him. The whole clan. They know we're investigating the late William Starwood. And they have some kind of statement to make."

Harry Abbott, the dead woman's husband, chewed stolidly on a dead cigar. He was lean, short, white-haired, and middle-aged, with bushy brows and a jutting jaw. His brother John, taller, heavier, and balding, stood beside the managing editor's desk. The Abbott girls, Alice and Irene, sat on a sofa. Irene, the older girl, puffed lazily on a cig-

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arette; Alice, seemingly bored, studied her fingernails.

Lear and Moran took chairs. The managing editor looked at John Abbott, who cleared his throat and said, "Gentlemen, we're here to volunteer information about Elvira Abbott and a desk clerk named William Stull. And then to ask you, in good conscience, not to print it. We've just come from the *Journal*. Mr. Moon and some executives there said they'd abide by your decision."

Lear said, "We are investigating William Stull. But how did you know?"

"I read about his death in your newspaper," Irene put in coolly. "I knew he'd changed his name to Starwood. Later, I called his apartment. The manager said two reporters and an insurance investigator had already been there, asking questions. So Alice and I called our father and Uncle Harry and told them the truth. And we all decided to come up here and tell you."

"What is the truth?"

"Irene and I," Alice said, "have been paying blackmail to Stull for years."

"Your father and your uncle had no knowledge of this?"

"No."

"What hold did Stull have on you girls?"

"I'll explain that," Harry Abbott said. "My wife Elvira and William Stull were lovers." He paused. "I knew that at the time of the murder. Private detectives watched my wife for me, so if she ever sued for divorce I'd have evidence of my own. Elvira's affair with Stull broke up just before the murder. But apparently, Elvira wrote Stull some letters—the usual passionate effusions, plus a lot of intimate information about our whole family, including Alice and Irene. Stull threatened to sell those letters to scandal magazines if the girls didn't pay him off."

"Stull," Irene added, "was shrewd about it. He didn't ask for much. Just a twenty-thousand down payment, when we got the insurance settlement, and two thousand each month thereafter. It might seem a lot to most people, but Alice and I could afford it easily. So to protect the family name, we decided to pay him and not even tell our father or Uncle Harry."

"Stull," Lear said, "only deposited one thousand a month with his broker."

"We gave him two. We don't know what he did with the money."

"If you knew Stull had been your wife's lover," Moran asked Harry Abbott, "why didn't you tell the police?"

"I should have. And after we leave here today I will. But after the police found Stull had no connection with the crime, I saw no reason to expose their relationship. Elvira had become an unstable woman. She drank too much. She developed a string of infatuations

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for people like Stull—bellboys, lifeguards, and so on. She took an overdose of sleeping pills over one of those affairs. Other times, she had to pay blackmail money herself. John and I hushed most of those incidents up. If her relationship with Stull had been disclosed, it would have opened a Pandora's box of scandal, and dragged all our names through the mud."

John Abbott said, "We can't stop you from printing that William Starwood was actually William Stull, a desk clerk at Elvira's hotel. But we were sure you'd learn Stull was blackmailing the girls. And now that we've told you why they paid him, we ask you to keep that out of your story. If you print it, all you'll do is dirty the name of a woman who has been dead five years, and sell a few extra papers by cashing in on our family troubles."

"I might add," Harry Abbott said genially, "that if you print it, I'll sue you for invasion of privacy, since this has no bearing on my wife's murder whatsoever."

The managing editor looked at Moran. "Well, Leo?"

"It's a reasonable request," Moran conceded. "Despite what you might think, we don't print scandal for scandal's sake. But if there's more to this than you've told us, we'll print the story and risk a suit."

"If that happens," Harry Abbott said, "there won't be a suit."

Lear and Moran rose.

"Incidentally," Lear said, "there's one other possibility. Namely, that the hit-and-run driver who killed Stull did so deliberately."

Irene Abbott looked startled. She asked, "Is there any evidence to support that?"

"Not yet. But if it turns up, all bets we just made here are off."

Lear found Chester Moon in a newspaperman's bar. Moon stared philosophically at a half-empty glass of beer. Lear took a seat beside him and ordered a drink.

"Well, Chester," Lear said, "it looks as if the Abbott family headed us off at the pass."

"Doesn't it, though."

"I see both our papers just printed the same story in the early edition. Three short paragraphs saying Starwood was really Stull. And the cops are checking for a connection with the Abbott murder, but don't expect to find one."

"What," Moon asked guardedly, "did *you* think of the yarn the Abbotts palmed off on our bosses this afternoon?"

"I have reservations."

"So do I. 'Family name,' indeed. Since when did Alice or Irene give a damn about their family name? But then, maybe they've reformed."

"Yeah. I suppose you talked to that stockbroker."

"I did. Boy, did he jump when I told him you were a reporter. But he told me how Stull deposited a grand a month to the account, instead of the two grand Irene ad-

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mitted paying. You ruined my interview with Stull's mother, by the way. When you left, she was so upset that she wouldn't talk. She hollered yes, her son was Bill Stull; no, she didn't know where he got his money; and if I wanted to find out I should see Donnell. Then she slammed the door."

Lear drained his glass. "I got to hand it to you, Chester. Recognizing that fuzzy halftone in our paper. *I* didn't peg Stull until I saw the original print."

"Class will tell. It was nice of your desk to get a picture, so I could make the identification in *your* sheet. I don't subscribe to your home delivery edition, but I stop at my newsstand for your racing final every morning."

"Your desk didn't send a photographer to Park Ridge last night?"

"No. As soon as I saw the picture, I checked. But we didn't have a man anywhere near there." Moon paused. "Got any new ideas about the Abbott murder? I have a few. Since we're temporarily blocked by collusion among our respective editors, maybe we can put our heads together and come up with something."

"I do have an idea." Lear paid for his drink and rose. "The next time we get together, we'll kick it around and see if it yelps."

Thoughtfully, Lear walked back to the *Express*. In the photo lab he asked the chief photographer, "You have any guys getting off duty soon who live near Park Ridge?"

"Sam lives near there. He's off at six. Why?"

Lear scrawled a name on a slip of paper. "This is important. I'll send this slip to the library. The library will send you a picture of the man whose name is on here. Make a head-and-shoulders blowup of the guy. Then let Sam off a few minutes early. On his way home have him take the print to a Mrs. William Starwood in Park Ridge. Have her look at it and tell him if she's ever seen the man face-to-face before, and under what circumstances. Then ask Sam to call me at Gus's. I'll be eating supper there."

Lear returned to the City Room. He dialed Mike O'Brien at the insurance investigator's home.

"Mike? Barney Lear. How'd you like to recover a lot of money for your insurance companies? In exchange for an exclusive break on all actions your companies take, assuming my theory is correct."

"It's a deal. I'm in the mood for some good news. I talked to the Abbotts this afternoon, and I guess that William Stull lead is a bust. I see by your first edition that the Abbotts talked to you, too."

"They did. But don't give up yet. I'll stop at your place about eight. And have your hat ready. After we talk, we'll take a little trip."

O'Brien lived in a southern sub-

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urb an hour's drive from the Loop. As Barney Lear parked, five of O'Brien's youngsters were romping in the green, treeless yard. O'Brien's wife, holding the sixth child, opened the door for the reporter.

Lear found Mike in a rumpus room partly lined with filing cabinets. O'Brien handed Lear a cold can of beer and settled behind a desk. Lear pulled up a rattan chair.

"What's your theory, Barney?"

"I think," Lear said, taking a swig of beer, "Elvira Abbott committed suicide."

"You're kidding."

"No, I'm not. It makes sense. Mike, when you saw the Abbotts today, did any of them mention that Elvira had tried suicide before? Over a love affair?"

"No," O'Brien replied thoughtfully. "And we had no record of any incident of that sort."

"Naturally. Harry and John Abbott hushed it up. But Elvira and Stull had an affair, and it had just broken up. So suppose Elvira tried suicide again, and this time succeeded? And suppose the Abbott girls went to her apartment that night, found the body, and then rigged everything to make it look like murder? So they could collect Elvira's insurance? Because in Illinois most insurance companies won't pay off on a suicide unless there's a suicide clause in the policy."

"That's true. The policy didn't have a suicide clause, and *our* company certainly wouldn't have paid off. But why would the girls do it? They were due to inherit millions."

"Yeah, but at the time they were still on allowances. And the Abbott girls are smart about money. It would be another year or two before they'd get big dough from the Abbott family. With the insurance settlement they'd get more than a hundred grand each right then and there."

The reporter drank more beer. "It would have been easy, Mike. The girls could have done it in just a few minutes, and then called the cops. Knocked furniture around, tied Elvira's body to the chair, opened the safe, and removed the jewels. The girls stayed in the apartment often enough to know that the combination was in the desk. They could have put the jewels in envelopes addressed to themselves, and dropped them down the mail chute. Or hidden the jewels in their purses. The cops wouldn't subject *them* to a search. That's how I think they got the gun out—in a purse, or hidden on one of their persons."

"It's conceivable," O'Brien admitted. "But how does William Stull fit in?"

"What's the last thing Elvira did? She went out to mail a letter. I think she wrote Stull a suicide note. Then she went back upstairs and shot herself. And once Stull got that note, he figured out quick enough what the Abbott girls had done. That gave him a hold over the girls, something a lot more substantial

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than supposed slurs on the family name."

"Okay. If it's true, how do we prove it?"

"Simple. We find the suicide note. I think that's what the burglar who broke into Stull's apartment stole. If we find the burglar, your insurance company might get *all* its money back. And I think I know where to find him."

O'Brien rose. "I'll get my hat. Where are we going?"

Lear gazed at the ceiling. "To the detective bureau," he said. "Where you'll be booked for suspicion of William Stull's murder."

O'Brien took a step forward. Lear set the beer can down and hunched his immense shoulders.

"You wouldn't try anything, would you, Mike? With your wife upstairs? And the kids in the yard?"

The insurance investigator didn't reply.

Lear relaxed. "Of course not. Stull went to you with the note, didn't he? He figured it was worth plenty to the insurance companies. But you saw its potentialities for perpetual blackmail. You talked Stull into going along with your scheme. So you and Stull blackmailed the Abbott girls together. That's why Stull got only half the payments. But recently he got greedy; he asked for more. So you stole the suicide note from his apartment first. Then you ran him down with a car. And your plan would have worked, if our photographer hadn't picked up Stull's picture."

Casually, the reporter lit a cigarette. "That," he went on, "scared you. So you went to Stull's apartment this morning to see if anyone would show up, checking the resemblance between Stull and Starwood. Moon beat you there, and then I came along. After we left the broker's, you must have called the Abbott girls and told them Moon and I were on the trail. You ordered them to call their father and their uncle immediately with a fake yarn about being blackmailed over Elvira's love letters, so they could all rush to the newspapers and try to kill the probe before matters got out of hand. You figured that after the cops made a routine check, you'd be free to go on blackmailing the girls."

"You can't prove any of that, Barney."

"Can't I? How come, Mike, you knew the *Express* ran Starwood's picture? You said you saw the picture over breakfast at home. But Chester Moon reminded me this evening that the racing final, the only edition in which the picture appeared, is obtainable only at newsstands."

"I made a mistake. It must have been the racing final I saw it in."

"You sure did make a mistake. Mike, you knew as early as last night that the *Express* had Stull's picture. After you killed Stull, you

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drove out in your own car to his mother's house in Park Ridge. You posed as a *Journal* photographer. One of our guys just showed her your picture. She made a positive identification. I think you drove out there to learn if Stull had told her anything about you. If he had, you probably intended to murder her too. Lucky for her that she didn't know anything. But she did tell you a man from the *Express* had obtained her son's photograph."

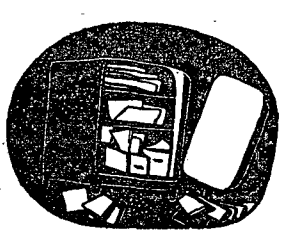
Lear rose. "You'll have a tough time explaining your presence in Park Ridge *before* the story of Stull's death was even out. As for proof—those pants you tore while you drove the murder car are probably in this house somewhere. I think we'll find Elvira's love letters and suicide note here too. Some guys from Homicide are parked down the street, waiting for us to walk out, so they can begin their search. Anyhow, I don't think the Abbott girls will cover for you once they learn you're a murderer. So let's go."

Twenty minutes later Lear called his city desk on his car radio.

"Leo? All wrapped up. O'Brien began confessing as soon as we walked outside and the cops moved in. He even dug up the suicide note —he'd buried the strongbox in the back yard. I'll stop at the nearest drug store and telephone the details to rewrite. We'll make the three-star edition easy."

"Great. You plan to claim the reward the *Journal* offered for Elvira Abbott's killer?"

"I could try." Lear chuckled. "But since it was suicide, not murder, the *Journal* will probably renege on the reward. But I told the cops to put in a claim anyhow. And if the *Journal* pays off, the money will go to O'Brien's wife and six kids. They'll need it a lot more than I will."



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TALES OF THE REGENT'S CLUB

Beginning what we hope will be a new series of provocative puzzlers—'tec teasers that will tantalize and titillate . . . If you don't know the fascinating parlor game which is the basis of this unusual detective story, you have a delightful surprise coming your way; and if you don't try the game yourselves (without murder as the bait and background), we'll be surprised . . .

HAT TRICK

by STEPHEN BARR

AMONG MANY THINGS THAT SET IT apart from the other London clubs, the Regent's has a reputation for a certain kind of parlor game. Just as it is impossible to make an assertion there without its being challenged, no games—from chess to billiards, from anagrams to tiddlywinks—escape some questionable refinement, or alleged improvement.

Chess, for example, is played not by two but three people in rotation, so that each man finds himself playing alternately white and black, and must keep very careful account of his planning to avoid walking into a trap of his own contrivance. Recently some of the younger members in a burst of misguided ingenuity decided to make a few changes in bridge, and were greatly chagrined when their elders informed them that they had reinvented whist.

Parlor games—provided they are difficult enough to satisfy the members—are likely to undergo even more bizarre modifications.

It was one of these young men who introduced, one evening, what to him was a new parlor game. Two objects are selected by a committee and placed on a table in an alcove off the Smoking Room. Each object is covered with a hat, and the chosen player goes in and looks under one, and only one, of the hats. Then he returns and sits facing the committee. It is their purpose to determine which object he looked at—and his to conceal it. No questions are asked, but words are said, to which the player must give immediate associations.

If the word given were, say, "White," one might expect the player to say, "Black," or to the word "Dog" he might reply "Poodle." The young man, Weelks, who had introduced the game to us and headed the committee in its first demonstration, chose as the

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two objects a silver cigarette lighter and a red billiard ball. I was chosen as the gull, or questionee. Weelks was most ingenious in his list of words, to which I was to give immediate associations.

"Color," was the first, and I said "Blush." He had told us that we didn't *have* to answer at once, but that he and his confreres would notice and mark any delays, and count them as evasions.

"Light," was the next, and I thought I would be safe to reply "Match"—I had seen the silver cigarette lighter, of course, other-otherwise I would likely have said "Dark," although not certainly.

"Ball," said Weelks, and I said "Dance." I noticed that he made a note on a piece of paper, which puzzled me at the time; but he eventually told me it was a negative mark on the red-billiard-ball side.

Then he said "Silver," and I managed to say "Long John," almost instantly. But his eyebrows went up—it appeared subsequently that in spite of my ingenuity and promptness I had gulped and blinked.

"Ivory," he said, and I replied "Tusk"—and without gulping. (What *was* under the other hat?)

"I'm pretty sure, aren't you?" Weelks said to the others, and they nodded. "We'll give him one more pair just to make sure," he said. "Fluid."

"Er . . . pet- petrol."

"Cue."

"Actor," I said, and they all laughed.

"All right, chum, you saw a cigarette lighter."

I nodded, feeling slightly foolish.

"What the devil's the other thing?"

"Red billiard ball." Weelks looked around in a pleased way. "It's infallible," he said, but another, older, member shook his head. "Well, nearly infallible," Weelks conceded. "Sometimes the chap catches on to what the other object is, and then he may be able to fool you—but not often."

The older member was not satisfied. "All it is," he said, "is a new modification of the lie detector, and I fail to see how it can be any more reliable. The lie detector is nowadays not admissible as evidence in most courts, and I fail to see—"

"What you fail to see," Dr. Sylvan Moore interrupted, "is that the polygraph—or lie detector, as you call it—works on a totally different principle."

Owing to the fact that Dr. Moore is our oldest member, and partly to the general delight of the membership in contention, Weelks accepted the interruption and sat back expectantly. After all, it was not he who was being interrupted.

The polygraph (Dr. Moore went on) makes a continuous record on a paper strip of the heartbeat, respiration, and various other bodily functions, which may or may not give

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a clue to the emotional responses of the suspect. This game, on the other hand—and it is not as new as you appear to think, Weelks—relies entirely on guilty association. Or guilty knowledge. Perhaps gulps and blinking (he glanced at me) are taken into account, but the point is whether the suspect is aware of what he is supposed to be aware of.

It is very unlikely that someone who had not seen that cigarette lighter would have thought instantly of petrol, on hearing the word "Fluid," but the speed of his pulse doesn't come into it.

The mental associations which we look for here are not the ones buried in the unconscious, but the ones guiltily acquired—and only too well remembered. And you, Weelks, are mistaken in believing that it is an advantage if the suspect guesses what the other object is—it puts him off his guard. Moreover, even if he guesses it, he has in fact *not* seen it and will not respond quite correctly. And I might add that there are some other interesting facets to the game.

Most of you only know the period following World War I by hearsay, so you may not remember Lady Cole. She was a lion hunter—that is, a collector of the famous or notorious, whom she invited to her parties. No one but Lady Cole would have invited Peter Jeffreys so soon after his wife's murder, particularly since it was well-known that he had been the prime suspect. But invite him she did, and more incredibly still, Sir John Streeter, the Police Commissioner. I was there too—one of the non-lions.

Jeffreys' wife had been found in her flat on Curzon Street, strangled. There were no clues, but from the marks on her throat it was determined that the murderer had not used his hands, but something like a cord. Subsequent microscopic analysis showed a few silk fibers, but beyond a trace of red dye, they proved nothing except that a dressing gown cord might have been used—or a tie. Science can only go so far—there wasn't enough silk. None of these details were made public as no one had been formally charged, let alone brought to trial.

She and Jeffreys were divorced, and his motives for killing her are not germane to this story—they were revenge and stinginess. He was paying her a huge alimony and it was for this reason that he was suspected. The police questioned him at length because no one else had a known motive, and nothing was stolen. He had no alibi, but it was impossible to place him at the scene of the crime. He just insisted he had never been in her flat; he couldn't prove it, but neither could the police disprove it, and they knew they hadn't a case strong enough for an indictment.

You must keep in mind that no one but the police knew the circumstances except, of course, the murderer—and, I might add, myself,

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since Streeter had discussed the case with me. It may seem odd for the Commissioner to interest himself in a murder case which had not got beyond the preliminary investigations, but Streeter had known Mrs. Jeffreys and he knew that I had, also. She was a pathetic, rather than an admirable figure. She was rather plain, and made up for it by—er—making up heavily. This brings up one other possible clue: her very brilliant pink lipstick had been smeared, and it could have left a stain on whatever was used to strangle her.

I had an idea, which I mentioned to Streeter: I had seen Mrs. Jeffreys in Bond Street the day before her murder and she was wearing a very smart-looking ascot—dark red silk with white polka dots. I had never seen it before. Could it, I suggested to Streeter, be the missing murder instrument?

He agreed it was a possibility, and had her flat searched again. The ascot was not found—but its discarded wrappings and invoice were. It had arrived from Paris the day before I saw her. But why had the murderer removed it? Streeter had a ready explanation: the average, or nontechnical, person, he informed me, believes the police can find fingerprints on anything, so the murderer wasn't going to take any chances—even with glossy silk.

This was serveral months before Lady Cole's party, and the case was no longer a subject of conversation and public surmise. Nevertheless, we were surprised to see Jeffreys there— if one could ever be surprised at Lady Cole's choice of guests. Someone suggested the hat game—it was having a run of popularity in 1921—and Lady Cole got Jeffreys into it the moment he arrived.

He was marvelous at it. Everyone else had been caught out in short order, but he was completely unfathomable. Then Streeter came in. If he had any emotions at seeing Jeffreys, he didn't show it. Lady Cole immediately suggested another round of the game and, to my mind, rather recklessly insisted that Jeffreys be the questionee again. She dragooned Streeter—and me—into being the committee of object selectors and inquisitioners.

Jeffreys had a somewhat bravura air as he left the room, and Streeter and I went into a huddle in a corner. After a while we selected the two objects, put them under two hats on a table hidden behind a screen, and called Jeffreys back. I should add that a precaution had been instituted by our hostess, which was that a neutral observer was stationed where he could bear witness that the player looked under one hat *only*. During the examination this observer had to remain silent and out of sight of the committee, to preclude his giving them any signal.

Sir John Streeter—at my earnest entreaty—did the questioning. Jef-

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freys seemed almost cocky, and sat down with a confident smile—he had, after all, been unbeaten so far.

As you have been doing, we alternated the words—first referring to object A, then to object B, then back to A, and so on.

"Piece," was Streeter's first word. I can tell you now that its reference was to a chess piece, the white bishop, and that was what Jeffreys had actually seen.

"String," he replied, without batting an eye.

"Silk," said Streeter next.

"Cotton."

"Knight," said Streeter.

"Day," Jeffreys replied promptly.

"Tie." We listened closely.

"Four-in-hand."

"Castle."

"Windsor."

"Scarf," Streeter said, and there was a short delay before Jeffreys said, "Muffler."

"Pawn."

"Ticket," Jeffreys said at once. It may have occurred to you that his answers were too consistently off the subject of chess; perhaps he should have made at least one reply with a chess meaning.

Streeter himself paused now, then he said, "Color."

One felt a definite tension. "White," Jeffreys said. In view of his clever avoidance of the white bishop this might seem significant.

"Check," said Streeter.

"Mate!" Jeffreys replied, and gave a slight blink, but it was not in character. Did he hope we would pounce on this as a giveaway, and accuse him of seeing the bishop?

But Streeter went on, "Ascot."

This time there was a definite pause, and Jeffreys' eyes flicked toward the screen with the table and the two hats behind it. He cleared his throat. "Sorry," he said. "Races."

"Dark red." Streeter was evidently abandoning the alternation.

"Er—light red."

"Lip."

Pause. "Tongue."

"Polka."

"D—waltz!" Suddenly Jeffreys seemed to break out of invisible bonds. He jumped up and started toward the screen, but Streeter got up too, and stood in his way.

"How did you *get* it?" Jeffreys cried. "It just isn't possible! I threw it into the Thames in a . . ." He raised his arms and let them drop, turned away, then sat down again.

Sir John phoned for the police to come for him, and that was that.

"But," Weelks said, "how *did* you get the scarf? The ascot, I mean. If he actually had, as you say—"

"Oh, we didn't have it," Dr. Moore said. "There was no ascot under the other hat."

"Then how the devil could you be sure he wouldn't look under the wrong hat?"

"There wasn't a wrong hat. The other hat had a white bishop under it, too."

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 270th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . The one word and one phrase that kept turning up in all readers' reports of this "first story" were "sensitive" and "sensitive writing"; and indeed the word and phrase are apt. This "first story" has mood and a strange kind of delicacy and, above all, sensitive (there's that word again!) perception; it is an auspicious "first" with a memorable quality, even though it breaks one of the "unwritten laws" of contemporary crime writing.

The author says of herself: " 'Mother of three' sounds rather wet, but the children (boys of nine and ten, girl of eight) are the central facts of my life. Another fact is the central heating [the author now lives in England], and my wish to keep the radiators gurgling (distant cousin, many times removed, of potboiling) had a good deal to do with my getting down to writing . . . my ties are to Virginia . . . After majoring in English at the University of Michigan, I spent two joyous years in Manhattan culminating in marriage . . . The succeeding diaper years were followed by a most interesting stay of three years in Havana . . . then two years in Switzerland . . . and then last year we moved to England and bought a house within theatre distance of London . . ."

We certainly hope to have more stories from this most promising newcomer . . .

THE BAG MAN

by BROOKE WELD

THERE WAS A PIECE IN THE PAPER once about this woman in California who burned down her house. There wasn't much insurance on it, but still they found out it was she who did it; so she admitted it—yes, she said, she just hadn't felt like cleaning it up. What a gorgeously simple solution—though it does make one wonder, doesn't it? I was sitting on the landing by a pile of laundry, just smoking and thinking about this woman who burned down her house, almost enviously, when the front doorbell rang.

The front door had been stuck so that you can't open it for quite a while, so my friends who drop in for coffee and even the tradesmen have finally learned to come to the back

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door. No one in his right mind would try to sell encyclopedias or collect for charity at ten o'clock on a Monday morning, so I couldn't think who could possibly be at the front door. Well, at least I was dressed, so after I let it ring a few more times I went to see who it was. I admire the sort of people who can ignore bells and burn down houses —but I do know my own limitations.

Shouting through the window to please come to the rear, I went back to the kitchen and opened that door and began to explain about the front one when I stopped suddenly. I couldn't place the man standing there at all.

To begin with, he was terribly tall—maybe only six-four, but he looked even taller because he was thin and stooped, the way people are who have been told stand-straight, shoulders-back too often and have bumped their heads. Though his soft brown hair was longish and combed to hide a thin patch, I didn't judge him to be much older than I am, but I didn't like his looks one bit.

His eyes were too far apart and his features had a soft crumply look and he was much too pale—an unhealthy pallor that reminded me of those horrid maggots the boys will put in their pockets for fishing and then forget; he had a thin mustache drooping over but you could still see his mouth was weak, and a receding chin which a beard might have helped, except he'd evidently decided not to go the whole hog. A well-cut tweed jacket only added to his generally cadaverous air—it looked left over from some time when he'd weighed more.

He'd insinuated himself into the kitchen by the time I finished apologizing for the front door, and then he began to apologize for disturbing me. He did not have the manner of a salesman, and his voice was soft and so low that it was difficult for me to hear him. But he didn't say what he'd come about. I decided not to apologize for the kitchen being in rather a mess. I had a sudden impulse to push him clear out of it, but I didn't do it, of course.

It wasn't that I was afraid then—my neighbors are in hollering distance, and I could hear Millie Clark over the fence yelling at Bobby to stop splashing mud like that; but this man looked as if he ought to be squashed—and why should I have him in my kitchen at ten o'clock on a Monday morning, and him staring at his muddy shoes in awkward silence and not explaining who he was and why he was there. I made up my mind right then to get that front door fixed, so I could begin with a cold yes-what-is-it and keep people out.

He stood there another full minute looking at his shoes instead of my pleasant inquiring smile, which was getting pretty stiff, and twisting the brim of his soft black hat.

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His whole appearance was so strange, so unnerving somehow, that it was only then that I noticed the enormous burlap sack in his other hand. You'd think that would have been the first thing I'd have seen, but I hadn't—or maybe I had and just hadn't taken it in, the way you don't notice something that is all wrong, like a mackerel in a magnolia tree.

"I lived here, once." He flushed as his voice cut the resounding silence, and it made him look a lot more human. The pale brown eyes seemed to plead for help the instant before they slid away again to study his shoes, and suddenly I felt in command of the situation and rather sorry for him.

We'd been in the house less than a year, and it was the sort of old house a lot of people might have lived in. He might even have lived in it as a child—the only circumstance in which I could imagine anyone becoming actually attached to it. I'd wondered how long the Florida coastline crack had been in our bedroom ceiling, and who all the people were who had lain staring at it before me. If he thought he was going to make a sentimental journey through the house at this hour—and on a Monday—he was mistaken; but I still didn't think it would do any harm to be civil.

"Oh, really? That's interesting," I said. "I was just going to put the coffee on—would you like a cup?"

He shook his head, and mumbled, "Thank you very much, but I can't stop—I've only come for my things, if you don't mind."

What things, I wondered, taken aback. There was some junk in the attic and in the basement—some ours, some left by a previous owner. I hadn't got around to a really good clear-out, but nothing had looked the least bit valuable.

"What things? Where are they? I'm afraid I really don't know what you are talking about."

If I sounded irritated, I was, but he only passed his long bony white hand over his face as if, strangely, he didn't know himself what he was talking about.

"That's the trouble. I can't quite remember. But if I could look around, if you would just let me look, I might find it." He gave his big bag a nervous twitch. "I would take away anything that you wanted to get rid of—anything spoiled or stained, anything ragged or broken or torn, anything I could take away in my bag—" he paused—"anything that has failed or been left unfinished or forgotten . . ."

He looked at me suddenly, meeting my eyes for an instant with the same pleading look, but I simply stood there frozen. It was like my whole life spinning around—knowing that I had failed French, failed to write a hundred and eleven thank-you notes, failed my friends, left the P.T.A. project unfinished, and the curtains, and the crèche; forgotten to take Jim's suit to the

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cleaners, forgotten to take away Jimmy's tooth and leave the dime, forgotten the kettle boiling until there was this terrible smell. Everything seemed to drain away to make a hollow for this misery of self-loathing.

You probably haven't ever had that sort of feeling, but I get it quite often even though I know I'm very nice in some ways. But I think about the things I haven't done sometimes, and how things might be different, if only I had . . . Well, anyway, I just stood there like a gawk, wishing I were dead, until suddenly I came to my senses and realized this was all perfect nonsense.

"I'm afraid I really don't have anything for you, and I am very busy this morning." I had to cross in front of him to open the door, but I did it, and felt a lot better.

"If I could just look in the cellar or the attic—please? I wouldn't ask, but it matters such a lot—"

"What *is* it then? I'll have a look for you when I get time if you'll only give me some idea of what to look for."

He shook his head sadly, still staring at his muddy brown shoes. "I can't remember it, you see—it's something forgotten, unfinished, undone— But everything would be all right if I could just remember and find it and do it—everything would come out right then, you see."

Obviously the poor man was some sort of lunatic, but all I wanted to do was to get him out of that door.

"I'm sorry, but you really can't look now. Not this morning. I'll look later on. Later, when I have time, I'll look for whatever it is."

"Thank you—thank you for being so kind, so understanding. I believe you will find it for me, and I will leave my bag for you to put it in, and come back next week if I may —if it won't disturb you—"

"Yes, yes—next week. Next week will be fine, and I will try to put everything that was left here in your bag, or let you look for it then. Not now. Next week."

He seized my hand, and though I was too frightened to scream he only gave it a grateful wring. Then, with a little bow, he left.

I shut the door after him and I locked it. Half the time I forget to lock it, even at night, but I locked it then. Everything seemed to be jumping uncontrollably in my head, widening and narrowing like the reflections in a crazy mirror. That is supposed to be just your pulse beating.

I lit a cigarette, and then I made the coffee and had another cigarette. I'd have thought I was going crazy myself—except there was the burlap bag, lying just where he'd left it, by the door.

The natural thing would have been to run over to Millie Clark's and tell her about this weird experience; but I couldn't—I couldn't tell

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anyone, and I couldn't forget about it either. You can judge the effect it had on me when I tell you I started cleaning that house and I didn't stop all week. I had the front door fixed too, along with the bedroom window that was also stuck and the dripping faucet and a lot of little things like that.

Of course, Jim was still away in Cleveland, trying to swing that big deal, and with the children spending the summer at their grandmother's in Crescent Beach, it wasn't as if I had all the normal grind. But the only thing I didn't do was go near the attic or the cellar—I simply couldn't, though I thought about it all the time.

I had it in my mind that the bag man—that's the way I thought of him—would be back the next Monday, the same time as before. So I got up and dressed very nicely that morning, in a skirt instead of jeans, and then I went around the house putting finishing touches here and there until ten o'clock. After that I kept trying to see out of the upstairs window, and smoking and drinking coffee, feeling as if I were waiting to take an oral exam or was coming down with flu or something.

About three o'clock I decided he definitely wasn't coming; but I locked both doors to make sure he couldn't just walk in, and then I went down to the cellar.

That enormous burlap bag was lying halfway down the cellar stairs where I had pitched it after he'd left a week ago, but I kicked it aside and kept on down. The cellar wasn't really too bad—there was only the boiler down there and a huge old icebox someone had abandoned, and some of our empty packing crates.

I had pushed along one wall all the other things someone else hadn't bothered to pay the trash man to take away. There were untidy stacks of old *Saturday Evening Posts* with a few *National Geographics* mixed in; a broken ladder and a roll of chicken wire; an enormous rusty ax and a pitchfork with a missing tine; a simply filthy army blanket; an old photograph album without any snapshots in it; and a cheap edition of *Pollyanna*.

That was the lot. I even opened the icebox, but it was quite empty—no golden doubloons or fading love letters or forgotten bodies there. That left the attic.

It is a low-beamed spooky place—one large shadowy room stretching under the roof, with slat walls parallel to the eaves. By the light from the one small window I could see the looming shapes of our own trunks. I turned my attention to the other wall, where I'd left the discards of former owners, but I knew what was there: the unframed oil painting of amateur execution—dispirited cows beneath a noble oak; a broken high chair; a rather pretty oval mirror, badly cracked; several cartons of empty glass jam

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jars; a dressmaker's dummy of prim but ample contour; a stack of old Richmond *News Leaders*; and a thick layer of dust over everything. Nothing undone, nothing unfinished . . .

And yet looking at that line of discards, all at once I felt an unreasonable terror. I got out of there fast, and ran over to Millie's.

We had coffee and everything seemed blessedly normal in her cheerful kitchen as she griped about her husband's latest craze, photography, going on about how messy and expensive it was. The afternoon mail came while we were chatting, so I ran back to my house to see if there was anything interesting. There was just a letter from Jim, but I felt terribly let down to learn he wouldn't be home for another week. I mean, the house was really sparkling and he'd think I'd made the extra effort for him and be pleased, and I could easily think of some reason for him to have a good look around the attic.

The thing I'd noticed about the attic was that the discards I had lined against the wall were too close to the stairs. The stairs went right up the middle, with the window centered above them in the front; but that side didn't go back as far as the other side, and that slat wall was taller.

I was perfectly sure that slat wall had a door—the door to a narrow room that someone, sometime for some reason had partitioned off. And I knew *I* wasn't going in it—not for all the rubies in Rajput, and not to see if someone had left forgotten there a few bits of Meissen or an Early American spinning wheel or perhaps some contemporary bones.

The week went by somehow, and when it finally ended without the bag man showing up again, it seemed unlikely that he ever would—I hoped not, anyway. But I decided to go over to Millie's before ten on Monday, just in case.

When the front doorbell rang at 9:30 I knew I was too late. I didn't want to answer it, but the back door was unlocked and I was even more afraid of his walking in and finding me—somehow that would be even worse than confronting him. Sometimes you just have to get things over.

"Good morning." He tried a smile, a baring of tobacco-stained teeth that made him look even worse than I had remembered. "I don't know if you remember, but I came here two weeks ago. You do remember?"

"Yes." I did remember.

"I left my bag, and now I have come for it."

"But you were supposed to come for it last week."

"I know, and I am terribly sorry about that. I wasn't free, you see, though I wanted to come very much. I felt sure, last Monday, that you had found it."

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"No. There isn't anything but a lot of junk. I looked."

His face fell, and for a panicky moment I thought he might cry.

"You didn't find it? It must be here—if only you would let me look I'm sure I would find it. Please, please let me come in and look for it."

He appeared so miserable that my terror fell away, leaving me strangely calm. After all, I wasn't alone in the middle of the country on a dark night or anything like that. I'd let my imagination run away with me because I didn't like his looks, and that wasn't his fault. But I would think of some way to avoid the attic—no, not the attic.

"Your bag is in the cellar, and there are a few things there—"

I led the way to the cellar steps, but I made him go down ahead of me. His face fell as he saw the useless little collection. With a new spasm of terror I realized that the rusty ax and the broken pitchfork would make effective if horrid weapons. Yet he barely glanced at them. He picked up the photograph album, but lost interest when he found its pages empty, and then his attention turned to the icebox.

"It's quite empty—I opened it and looked." My voice was thin and strained, as if I were lying but he paid no attention and opened it.

"How big it is! Big enough to hold an ox, this old-fashioned kind."

Or a man, I thought. I don't know what made me think that, but the same idea must have come into his head.

"Even a person could fit into it —" He looked at me inquiringly, as if to ask what I thought of this notion, and I took an involuntary step backward. I am only five feet two, and small-boned. I could easily fit into that icebox, or into his bag . . .

"A tall person, like yourself?"

He looked at it gravely, considering. "I think so—and if I could anyone could, I guess." He gave a low chuckle and bared the yellow teeth again.

"Oh, yes, anyone could if you could—but I shouldn't think it would be very comfortable." I giggled, pointlessly. What a delightful, witty conversation we were having.

But he was actually climbing into the thing—he had to hunch way over, but in the natal position, with his head resting on his drawn-up knees, he managed quite nicely. A few steps forward brought me to the center of the cellar where I watched, fascinated, the little wriggles he was making to get himself comfortable. There is no use at all in trying to describe it—you'd have to see him yourself at that moment to realize how much a man can look like a maggot.

It took me only three more steps to reach the icebox door and slam it shut.

In another instant I was out of the house, outside breathing the

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soft air, hearing the voices of children quarreling and the Robinson's basset giving tongue over a cat. The Number 23 bus stops just across the street, and as one was just pulling in, I jumped on. I almost jumped off at the next stop though, because I had started thinking—thinking about the thing I had done.

How long would it take for someone to die, shut up like that? If I went right back he might be all right. What could you say to a perfect stranger you had shut up in an icebox? It wasn't just the social awkwardness of the situation that stopped me, it was that I was too scared. I simply couldn't.

Suppose he was already dead.

Or suppose he wasn't.

It's a forty-minute ride to the end of the bus line, but I didn't notice it and the driver had to tell me to get off when we reached the terminus. Maybe it hadn't taken the bag man long, just a moment perhaps of terror and panic and disbelief and trying to get his breath and choking—I hoped it hadn't taken long.

If only I'd had the front door fixed sooner he might never have got into my kitchen; if only I'd cleared everything out when we'd first moved in; if only I'd got to Millie's earlier today; if only Jim had come home; if only I'd asked the Clarks or the police or anyone to look in the attic; if only I'd just stayed upstairs and told him to look in the cellar for himself . . . I guess a hundred little things could have prevented it. I wondered what kind of man he'd been, and what his life had been, and what it was that he had wanted so much to find—something unfinished, but finished now.

On the ride back I started to think about what I must do. That is the sort of courage I do have, the kind a lot of women have—more than men, I think—about getting through anything you absolutely have to get through. Fortunately, I'd committed the sort of crime that is difficult to solve—I'd murdered someone I didn't know, and without reason. There was no possible way to connect his life with mine. There would be no sign of struggle, no blood, no weapon, no clue. Except his body.

I would have to take him out, this evening, and if I could get him even halfway into that big burlap bag I could drag him up the cellar steps and through the inside door to the garage without anyone seeing. But Jim had the car. I would pretend I needed another load of leafmold for the azaleas, and borrow the Clarks' car.

Then when I was sure no one was around I would dump him in some underbrush, and drive to another part of the wood for the leafmold. Even if he was found right away, it would be just one of those odd cases that are never solved. The worst part would be to go down to the cellar and open that icebox door.

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Thinking about that, I was almost glad to see the police already there. They'd had to wait quite a while, and I certainly wouldn't have minded if they'd helped themselves to some coffee—but they had just waited.

The bag man really was a lunatic, you see, but they were beginning to give him a little freedom at the sanitarium because he seemed so much better and was so very gentle. That Monday—the first time he came to my house—was his first excursion by himself. They hadn't let him leave the following Monday, though, because he seemed overexcited, and the next Monday—today—they had sent someone along to follow him, just to make sure that nothing went wrong.

The guard from the sanitarium had been watching from the bus stop across the street, and when he saw me tear out of the house and onto that bus like a loony, he'd waited a minute or two, and then gone in the front door I'd thoughtlessly left wide open. I'd left the cellar light on too, so that guided him down there, and he was just in time.

I'm thankful for that. Otherwise there would have been a trial—but mainly I am thankful for his sake, the bag man's. The Chief of Police was really on my side—said they shouldn't go around turning lunatics loose on helpless housewives like that.

I told them about the attic. Behind the partition they found the butterfly collection that he was looking for, and all the paraphernalia of the hunter, with empty cases for mounting, and one half done. That must have been "the unfinished thing." He'd begun collecting butterflies when he was just a little boy, but by the time he was sixteen it had become a mania, and his mother couldn't get him to pay attention to anything else. They had a lot of rows about it, naturally, and finally she hid all the butterfly equipment in the attic and told him she had given it away to the trash man.

He was the sort of adolescent they now call disturbed, because he took after his mother with an icepick. Funny, isn't it—an icepick and an icebox. He wasn't successful with his murder either—his mother is still living with her daughter in Fort Lauderdale—but he gave her a couple of nasty punctures, and remorse or something sent him clean over the edge and he's been in the sanitarium ever since. I can understand why his mother just left the butterflies there, behind the partition where she'd hidden them. It's a pitiful sort of story if you think about it, and I'm terribly glad I didn't really kill him and that now he has his butterfly collection back.

Well, if you've been following all this in the *Times Dispatch* or the *News Leader*, you know they decided it was temporary insanity

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due to fright, but the papers don't give any idea of how it really happened, and you may have wondered —the way I did about that woman who burned her house down. It is a little hard to understand—when you realize that *any* little thing could have prevented it—but Jim says they'll say that about the atom bomb some day.

It's silly, nothing can possibly happen—but there is one thing that frightens me. After I get out of this hospital where they've been observing me, I'll have to go to the sanitarium, or it wouldn't look right.

But suppose I run into the bag man there? That's what I can't stop thinking about.

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William O'Farrell's "Over There—Darkness," which first appeared in the October 1958 issue of "Sleuth Mystery Magazine" (edited and sponsored by MWA), was awarded the coveted "Edgar" by the Mystery Writers of America and judged to be the best mystery short story published during 1958. We bring it to you now—just in case you missed it six years ago. . . .

OVER THERE—DARKNESS

by WILLIAM O'FARRELL

EVERYTHING THAT MISS FOX owned was of the finest quality. She was a middle-aged woman with delicate features and soft, graying hair who lived alone in self-contained elegance. She dressed beautifully, spending a great deal of thought and money on her clothes. Her only companion was a dog named Vanessa, a pedigreed black poodle who, unlike her mistress, was a little overweight.

Miss Fox was as graceful and slim as she had ever been. She had a sizeable income from a trust fund and her own lovely furniture in a four-room apartment. The apartment was in a huge, well-managed building which was located, incongruously, in a rowdy neighborhood of the Chelsea district in New York.

She was hardly aware of the neighborhood. She had signed a long-term lease during the housing shortage, and the management had considerately insulated her from any outside crudeness from the day she had moved in. There was a supermarket on the ground floor of the building. There was also a rental library, a beauty salon, and an excellent restaurant.

Theoretically, she could have remained inside the apartment house indefinitely, and in effect that is what she did. But twice a day she walked the poodle along West Twenty-Third Street and six times a week her favorite elevator boy took the dog for longer walks at night.

Once, in the spring of 1943, a captain in the Quartermaster Corps had asked Miss Fox to marry him. He had given her the ring of her selection, and two weeks later he entered a hospital in Virginia. The captain had died there of a kidney complaint, and she had not seen him again before his death.

War-time travel was difficult and Miss Fox preferred to remember him as he had been, unwasted by illness. She had telegraphed flowers, relying on her florist to send something suitable. He was a member of

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the American Florists Association and had excellent taste.

The ring was exquisite—a diamond solitaire surrounded by emeralds—and Miss Fox still wore it. Her ring, her dog, and Eddie McMahon—the last in a different way and on a lower level—were the only things capable of stirring in her more than casual interest. All three were beautiful, and Eddie McMahon was very useful, too.

Eddie was the nighttime dog walker. He was young—not tall, but well proportioned—and he had long-lashed blue eyes and wavy brown hair that turned black under the dim lights of the elevator. He wore a neat navy-blue uniform with a gold stripe down the trousers and he had good manners. As men go, he was nice.

She paid him five dollars a week. That was above the going rate for dog walking, but she did not begrudge the extra money. The arrangement might have continued for as long as he kept his job and she stayed on in the apartment—if she had not made one small mistake.

That happened just before Christmas, and at the time she did not recognize it as a mistake. As in past years, she handed the doorman an envelope containing money to be divided among the other employees and himself; but in a separate envelope on which Eddie's name was written she put a twenty-dollar bill. It seemed to her that from that time on his attitude changed sharply.

He was as respectful as ever, but in early January he asked for his five dollars before it was due. The same thing happened in March, and although she gave him the money on both occasions, Miss Fox was disturbed. She lived within her income and expected other people to be as provident as herself.

Then, about the middle of April, he appeared unexpectedly at her apartment on his day off.

There was a knock on the door. She opened it and Eddie came in without being asked. Such a thing was unprecedented. It was necessary occasionally to admit a repairman or an employee of the gas company; but their visits were always preceded by a call on the house telephone, and Miss Fox kept the door open while they were inside.

Eddie closed the door. He also leaned against it, breathing heavily.

"Climbed the stairs," he explained. "Fourteen flights. Not supposed to hang around the building on my day off."

It was the first time she had seen him out of uniform. His suit was clean, but badly cut. It changed his whole appearance. He seemed older and heavier—a stranger, and an unprepossessing one.

"Then what are you doing here?" she asked.

"Miss Fox,"—his breathing was a little easier—"I have to talk to you. Just for a minute, please?"

He was almost pleading, and Miss Fox felt distaste. She walked

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through the small foyer into the living room.

"Come in," she said. Then, hearing his footsteps following her too closely, on impulse she called, "Vanessa!"

The poodle lay in its basket in a corner. It looked at her and immediately went to sleep again. Miss Fox walked to the windows overlooking the avenue, and stood there with her back turned to the room.

"Yes, Eddie?" She had always been proud of her gentle voice. It was a relief to hear it now, in perfect control.

Eddie took two more forward steps. When next he spoke, she judged that he was standing beside the coffee table on which she had just placed a cup of tea. The tea was getting cold and that annoyed her. She liked it steaming hot.

"Miss Fox, will you let me have fifty dollars? I need it bad. I'll pay you back. It'll take three, four weeks, but today I have to send this money order . . ."

His voice dwindled into silence. Miss Fox stood quietly, unshocked by the preposterous request. She felt, rather, an odd sense of satisfaction, as though having known that something like this was bound to come; she was glad to have it in the clear at last.

"You say this money is important to you?"

"Yes, ma'am. Very important."

"Why come to me?" she asked.

"Because I've already tried everywhere else. My watch is in hock. The union gave me a loan, but that's all gone. You couldn't unscrew an advance from the management here with a Stillson wrench. And because"—he hesitated—"because you're kind."

She turned. "Sit down, Eddie." She waited until he was sitting stiffly on the couch. "Why is it necessary to send a money order in such a rush? To whom?"

"To my girl." He saw her lips tighten and added quickly, "She's in this sanitarium. The state pays half the expenses, see, and I promised to pay the other half. I done it so far, too, but now there's this extra—"

"You're engaged?"

"I guess you could call it that," he said.

But there had been a pause before he spoke and obviously the idea was new to him. New and strange. Miss Fox glanced at the ring on her left hand. Her own romance had not been conducted in so casual a manner. There had been the short, but proper courtship, the proposal, the betrothal kiss. Marriage would have been the next orderly step if tragedy had not intervened.

She sighed and shook her head. "I can't lend you fifty dollars, Eddie. Don't you earn a good salary?"

"Seventy a week," he said morosely, "but that's not take-home pay."

"No matter how little you actually take home, it's merely a question of planning, Eddie. I live on

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a fixed income and every cent is budgeted. Fifty dollars?" She shrugged. "I couldn't possibly spare an amount as large as that."

Eddie was no longer listening. His eyes were fixed on something behind her back. She looked over her shoulder and saw her white gloves and alligator bag.

They were lying on the living-room table. Miss Fox grew hot, then cold—which was ridiculous, because there was no earthly way for Eddie to have learned that she had cashed a fairly large check only a few hours before.

"I'm sorry," she said firmly. "It's impossible."

His eyes had left the table. They were focused on her ring. For a moment he was silent. Then he rose.

"Yes, ma'am. My fault for asking. Excuse me, please."

He went out and closed the door.

A vague unrest covered the remainder of her day. She couldn't read. The laundry was delivered at four o'clock, and after she had put it away there was nothing more to do until six. At two minutes before the hour she turned on the television.

The program was a good one, but this evening nothing could have held her interest. The memory of Eddie's bland presumption kept creeping back into her mind. She snapped off the television and poured a glass of sherry. It was infuriating to think that, because he was vulgarly good-looking and a few years younger than herself, the boy had actually believed that he could take her in.

She drank her sherry, went into the bedroom. When she came back, she had changed her dress and was wearing a light spring coat. A bright scarf was tied around her head. It was a fetching ensemble and made her look ten years younger, but she hardly glanced at the mirror as she picked up her bag and pulled on her gloves.

She went downstairs to dinner a full three-quarters of an hour earlier than she usually did. She had a delicious dinner, which she did not enjoy, and was back in her apartment before eight o'clock.

At a quarter to ten, when the dog whimpered to go out, Miss Fox attached a leash of shocking pink to the poodle's matching collar, and once more she pulled on her gloves and picked up her alligator bag.

The weather was freakishly warm for April, so warm that the doorman had propped open the front doors of the apartment house. It had rained earlier, and the street lamps were reflected from the still-wet pavement like little moons put there to guide her feet.

There was an exhilarating quality about the night. It called for adventure and Miss Fox responded to it. She walked west instead of, as she usually did, in the direction of the well-lighted avenue toward the east.

On her right, as she strolled along, were the amber windows of her own apartment house. These

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extended west for a hundred yards. The building ended there and was succeeded by a long row of old brownstone fronts—respectable once, but fallen now into almost sinister disrepair. The demarcating line was like a frontier between light and darkness, and she determined to go only as far as the end of the building, and then turn back.

Reaching the predetermined spot, she pulled gently at Vanessa's leash. But the poodle had scented something beyond the dark frontier and strained forward. After a token struggle Miss Fox let the dog have her way.

"Oh, very well," she said aloud, "but only as far as the next tree, dear."

They never reached the tree. Halfway there, a rough arm encircled Miss Fox's throat. She was bent over backward and a hand was clasped across her mouth.

Blood pounded in her ears as above her she saw, for just an instant, a man's shadowed face. She tried to scream and couldn't, and the last thing she heard was Vanessa's frantic yelp. Then the black world tilted up on end and slid away.

When she regained consciousness, she was lying on the sidewalk. The doorman from the apartment house was kneeling beside her; the glove had been stripped from her left hand, and her diamond and emerald ring was gone.

So was her alligator bag containing $180, but as she explained to Detective Sergeant Kirby in her apartment a half hour later, the money wasn't important. What she wanted—what she demanded, in fact—was the immediate return of her ring.

Sergeant Kirby assured her that everything possible would be done. "We don't have a lot to work on, though. You say you wouldn't know the man if you saw him again?"

Miss Fox thoughtfully fingered the bandage around her throat. The policeman was trying to be helpful, but he was going about it in such a plodding way. The fact that she had glimpsed her assailant only for an instant and in deep shadow meant very little. He had brutally manhandled her. She would be able to pick him out of any crowd.

"I did say that," she admitted, "but now I'm beginning to remember how he looked."

"Description?"

"He had dark hair and—let me think—he was strong, but not especially tall . . ."

"Clothes?"

"I didn't notice. His sleeve was of some coarse material."

"Did he say anything?"

"No. I heard nothing, but the dog. Now that I think of it," Miss Fox said, "it's odd that she didn't bark until after the attack."

"I've thought of that." Kirby got up from his chair. "Another point is that the mugger only tore the glove off your left hand. It's almost

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as though he knew about the ring."

Eddie! The abrupt revelation caused Miss Fox no surprise. It was only logical. That afternoon he had tried to borrow $50. Refused, he had stared at her ring—as now it came to her quite clearly—with unconcealed cupidity. There could be no doubt about it. Eddie was the thief.

But she said nothing. If, employing their own means, the police found and arrested him, that was their business. Her business was to get the ring back. That, she believed, she knew how to do.

Sergeant Kirby was leaving and she rose to say goodbye. "Thank you so much. I may expect to hear from you?"

"Probably very soon. If it isn't soon it may be never. That's how these things work." He rubbed Vanessa's ears. "You can thank your dog for spreading the alarm, Miss Fox."

"Yes. Good night, Sergeant."

She went to bed, but could not fall asleep. After a tortured half hour she had to take a capsule. It worked, but just as she was dozing off, she was aroused by the ringing of the telephone.

"Hope I didn't wake you," Sergeant Kirby said. "We've picked up a man who may have done the job. Can you come down?"

Miss Fox was half doped and thoroughly exasperated. There was no reason why this unpleasant business of identification could not have been postponed until the morning. "At this hour? Come down where?"

He gave her the station house address. "It's only one o'clock."

"Does he have my ring?"

"Not on him. But if you make a positive I.D., I'll get it back."

"Very well. As soon as I can find a taxi, I'll be there."

The station house was only a few blocks away. The taxi rounded a corner and pulled up at the curb. Miss Fox saw a dreary looking building with a green light beside its wide front door. "Here you are, lady," the taxi driver said.

Then she was in a functionally furnished room and Sergeant Kirby was telling her that the suspect had been arrested in a Tenth Avenue bar. "Within a block of where it happened and only twenty minutes later. He was half drunk and flashing a wad of bills he can't account for. Bad record, too. Looks like we wound this up in record time."

"If you have," Miss Fox said, "no one will be happier than I, Sergeant Kirby."

But she was disappointed. The man shoved through the doorway by a uniformed policeman was not Eddie. He was Eddie's height and had dark hair, but there was no resemblance otherwise. His hands were filthy. It was unthinkable that she had been touched by such grimy hands.

"No." She shook her head. "It is not he."

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"You're sure?" Kirby sounded disappointed.

"Quite sure," she said, avoiding the man's eyes.

His eyes were insolent. He wore a flashy suit, black shirt, and yellow tie, but Miss Fox paid no attention to his clothes. She was too agitated by his dirty hands and bullying stare.

"Well, thanks for coming," Kirby said.

Miss Fox went home and slept until ten the following morning. Eddie's shift on the elevator started at noon. She took the dog out at eleven and told the doorman that she wanted to see Eddie as soon as he came in. He knocked on her door a few minutes before twelve.

She opened it. "Come in."

"Say, Miss Fox, I heard about what happened!"

"Come in, Eddie, and sit down," she said.

His expression, as he obeyed, was one of puzzled innocence. It was a pity, she thought, that so handsome a face should conceal a mind so devious. She stood erect, steeling herself to a distasteful task.

"So you've heard."

"Yes, ma'am. I always said this neighborhood ain't safe."

"You know I was robbed of some money and my ring?"

"That's what they say."

"Very well. Now listen carefully. I want to be quite sure you understand. I don't care about the money, but I want my ring. Its description has been circulated. Trying to sell it would be dangerous."

"That's right. It's plenty hot."

"So it might as well be returned to me. Particularly if I promise to forget the hundred and eighty dollars that I've lost, and say no more about the matter. Don't you agree?"

Eddie appeared to be thinking deeply. "Well, I don't know. This guy that mugged you—there is a couple of things he could do. He could break the ring up and get rid of the stones that way. Or he could wait until the heat's off and sell it somewheres out of town."

"He would still be taking a risk. I have a better idea. I'm prepared to pay five hundred dollars for the ring's return. Five hundred dollars, Eddie—and no questions asked."

He got up slowly. "I sure hope you get it back. Excuse me—I got to go to work." He walked toward the door, but stopped before he reached the foyer. "Look, Miss Fox, don't count too much on that plan of yours. What would you do—advertise? Chances are the guy would never see your ad, and if he did he'd be dumb to stick his neck out."

"You don't think I'll get my ring back?" There was an edge to Miss Fox's normally soft voice.

"No, ma'am. Not that way, I don't."

"You may go, Eddie," Miss Fox said.

The doorman announced Sergeant Kirby an hour later. He en-

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tered briskly and came directly to business.

"You have an arrangement with an elevator boy named McMahon to walk your dog. Yesterday was his day off, but he was seen leaving your apartment about two in the afternoon. Is that correct?"

Miss Fox walked to the window and stood with her back turned, as she had done the day before. "Why do you ask?"

"Routine. McMahon has a good record and he's a steady worker. On the other hand, he needs money. Why did he come here?"

She did not move. Her voice was cool and impersonal as she replied. "You seem to have ferreted out almost everything. You might as well know the rest. He wanted me to lend him fifty dollars."

"Did you do it?"

"Of course not."

There was a silence. Then Kirby asked quietly, "Was it McMahon?"

She turned and looked directly into the detective's eyes. "I had hoped it wouldn't come to this. I gave him his chance. I even offered him money to return the ring. He refused."

"You positively identify him?"

Unconsciously, she had already passed her own personal line of demarcation between light and darkness. "Yes, it was Eddie," Miss Fox said.

She did not look at Eddie during the trial. She kept her eyes averted as she testified. It was a short trial. He had no alibi. They brought him in and tried him, and sent him to prison for three years.

Or maybe it was for one year with the other two suspended. Miss Fox wasn't sure. She had her own problems now that Eddie was no longer on the elevator. She had to find someone else to walk Vanessa, and the other boys had suddenly become very busy. They seemed curiously indifferent as to whether or not they made extra money every week.

Eventually she was forced to hire a professional. He was unsatisfactory. The third night he called, Miss Fox smelled liquor on his breath. From then on she took the dog out every night herself.

At first she shunned the sidewalk west of the apartment house. She never even approached it until, in the heat of summer, the streets became more crowded and consequently safe. Then she found that her dread of the dark frontier had lessened greatly.

Fear was now no more than a rather pleasurable titillation of her senses. She sometimes permitted Vanessa to pull her right up to the line, and she would stand within inches of it, peering into unexplored darkness.

Summer passed and was succeeded by the fall, and in all that time she had no news of her ring. Sergeant Kirby told her that Eddie still insisted he was innocent—but

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of course Eddie would do that. She telephoned Kirby several times and he was always courteous, until one day in November two policemen came to her apartment and brusquely told her that the sergeant wanted to see her at the station house.

She was indignant. "Why doesn't he come here?"

"Couldn't tell you, lady. Just said he wanted to talk to you."

Kirby met her in the bare room she had been in once before. He looked grim. "We've found your ring," he said.

She displayed none of the emotion she was feeling. "I knew that sooner or later Eddie would tell the truth."

"McMahon never had it." The grimness in the detective's face was reflected in his voice. "Remember the man you *didn't* identify? We got him on another charge and the ring was in his room. He confessed."

Something was wrong. Something was so drastically wrong that Miss Fox couldn't absorb it immediately. "But I saw him! I saw Eddie!"

"Did you?"

"Well, I thought I did. I was so sure!"

"You certainly succeeded in giving that impression. As a result, I look like a fool and an innocent man's in jail."

Miss Fox said angrily, "I may have made a mistake, but it was an honest one. I believe it's the duty of the police to check these things. Could it have been that you were so anxious to arrest someone that you didn't care whether or not he was guilty?"

Kirby shrugged, looking past her at a blank space on the wall.

"If you have nothing further to say, give me my ring."

He wouldn't do it. He showed it to her, and there was no question about it being hers, and he said it would be returned to her in due time. Meanwhile, it was evidence and must be held. He wouldn't even tell her when Eddie would be released.

"I don't know," he said. "Why should you care?"

Miss Fox did care. She foresaw a period of strain when and if Eddie returned to his old job, and she wanted to avoid that by finding another apartment first. She disliked friction of any kind, and so she bought a box of expensive cigars and sent them to Sergeant Kirby. After that she was able to dismiss the detective from her mind.

During the weeks that followed she inspected a number of apartments, but none of them met her fastidious standards. She flinched from the ordeal of moving, and at last was forced to the realization that she was better off where she was.

Having accepted this, she made a generous gesture. She spoke personally to the manager of the apartment house and was surprised to learn that her request had been an-

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ticipated. He had already written to Eddie, offering to take him back.

"But it's thoughtful of you, Miss Fox," he said. "I must say I'm relieved."

She left his office satisfied he would tell Eddie what she'd done. Eddie would be grateful. What might have been a tense situation had been eased.

Eddie came back to work the week before Christmas. One morning she buckled on Vanessa's leash and pushed the elevator bell. With a minimum of delay the elevator door slid open, and there he was. Everything was as it had been, including his respectful smile.

"Good morning, Miss Fox."

"Eddie!" she said. "I can't tell you how happy I am."

He took her down to the lobby. By the time she had walked the dog, riding up in the elevator again, she had recovered from her surprise.

"Hold the car a moment," she said, stepping out on the fourteenth floor. "There's something I must say to you."

He held the door open, waiting. She turned in the softly lighted corridor to study him. He had changed. His smile was fixed and meaningless, and there was a glassy quality in his eyes.

Never mind. It was in her power to change that, and she would. "I want you to know that it wasn't easy for me to testify against you, Eddie. I only told the court what I believed to be the truth."

"Sure, Miss Fox."

"It was a terrible experience for both of us. I think the best thing we can do is to forget it and start afresh."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good," she said. "Vanessa will be waiting when you finish work tonight." She started down the corridor.

He stopped her. "Miss Fox, I won't be walking your dog any more."

She turned, incredulous and a little piqued. "You want more money, I suppose?"

"It isn't that," he said. "It's just that I can get along now on my pay. I don't have any extra expenses now."

"How about your fiancee?"

"She died," he said.

The elevator door slid shut. Miss Fox was alone.

She let herself into the apartment, sat down, and thought about it rationally. Everything had worked out for the best. The girl had been ill. Eddie would have found her an intolerable burden. He would get over her death.

She herself had gone through the same natural sequence of suffering and recuperation when the captain died. She told herself these things, but still remained unsatisfied, sensing that somewhere there was something she had overlooked.

At two o'clock she put on her

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coat again, walked to an elevator at the far end of the building, and went down to her bank.

When she returned, she told the doorman that she wanted to see Eddie during his coffee break. He came to her apartment at four o'clock. Miss Fox did not invite him to come in.

"I've been thinking about you," she said. "I want to help you—well, to rehabilitate yourself. As I once told you, I was prepared to pay five hundred dollars for my ring. I had the money set aside, and I can think of no better use for it than to give it to you."

She handed him an envelope. "Shall we call it a Christmas present, Eddie? Five one-hundred dollar bills."

There was a long moment while he stood holding the white envelope and looking at the floor. Then he put the envelope in his pocket. "Thank you very much, Miss Fox," he said.

Miss Fox was greatly relieved as she shut the door. It was a pity that Eddie had not accepted the $500 when she'd offered it to him eight months before. It would have been so simple. He could have taken the money and returned her ring—

But Eddie had not stolen the ring, she suddenly remembered. She shrugged. Anyway, it was finished now. She drank a cup of steaming tea and had a nice, long nap.

When she went out with the dog at ten that night, Eddie had already gone off duty. It was snowing, and she had always enjoyed the first snowfall of the season. Vanessa pulled to the right and Miss Fox humored her by walking west, mildly exhilarated by the drifting flakes.

She came to the end of the lighted apartment house and stood, as she had often stood before, on the very edge of darkness. A few yards ahead was the spot where the man had thrown her down.

She smiled nervously, telling herself that she was glad now it had happened. It was rather thrilling to look back from her present security to a danger safely passed.

"Let's go home, dear," she told Vanessa, and turned back.

A man blocked her way. He had come up behind her silently. Miss Fox gasped. Then her shrill scream echoed down the street.

He raised his arm. His open palm found and covered her face. He pushed. Miss Fox staggered backward, tripped and fell. She had time to scream once more before he stopped the noise at its source. The last thing she heard was the far-off yelping of her dog.

This time when the doorman found her, he was too late. She lay on her back, snowflakes falling in her open eyes. Between her rapidly stiffening fingers were five one-hundred dollar bills.

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A Congressman's 18-year-old daughter is the patsy in a shady political maneuver. And Chicago private eye, Mac, is plunged into mayhem and multiple murder.

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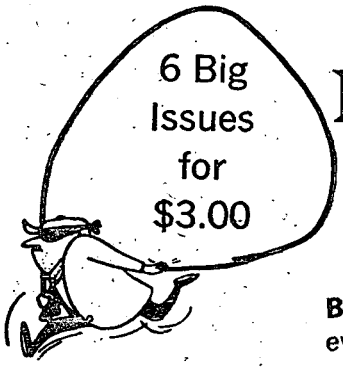

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BEST MYSTERIES OF THE MONTH

recommended by ANTHONY BOUCHER

This is Simenon year. In addition to his finest novel to date, the subtly penetrating THE BELLS OF BICÊTRE (Harcourt, Brace & World, $4.95), 1964 has brought us two other new Simenon novels and new translations of two old ones, and now the splendid omnibus FIVE TIMES MAIGRET (Harcourt, Brace & World, $5.95). This contains three out-of-print Maigret novels, including the memorable MAIGRET HAS SCRUPLES, plus two new to this country: MAIGRET'S MISTAKE and MAIGRET GOES TO SCHOOL—the latter an especially admirable example of Maigret's patient detection and his creator's incomparable skill with atmosphere and milieu. And do not overlook the revival of what may be Simenon's best crime-novel-without-Maigret, THE MAN WHO WATCHED THE TRAINS GO BY (Penguin 2150, 65c).

★★★★ **THE ROAD TO HELL . . . , *by Hubert Monteilhet*** (Simon & Schuster, $3.50)

Diabolically shrewd examination of conscience in the form of a detective story, gracefully and wittily translated by Richard Howard.

★★★★ **THIS ROUGH MAGIC, *by Mary Stewart*** (Mill-Morrow, $4.95)

The isle of Corfu, an enchanting dolphin and Shakespeare's THE TEMPEST are ingredients in Mrs. Stewart's inimitable romantic spell-casting.

★★★★ **THE ANTAGONISTS, *by William Haggard*** (Washburn, $3.50)

Four nations covet a great Yugoslav scientist; and only Haggard could weave such a finespun intricate mesh of plot and counterplot.

★★★ **VENDETTA FOR THE SAINT, *by Leslie Charteris*** (Crime Club, $3.95)

Simon Templar returns in all his glory, in his first booklength case since 1946, with the entire Mafia as his overmatched opponent.

★★★ **POP. 1280, *by Jim Thompson*** (Gold Medal k1438, 40c)

Vigorous storytelling, extraordinary characterization-in-depth, incisive prose—all mark Thompson's best and bitterest novel in years.

Mark Twain's unfinished SIMON WHEELER, DETECTIVE (1877), now published for the first time and carefully edited by Franklin R. Rogers (New York Public Library, $5), is expectably uneven, but contains some of the most broadly hilarious scenes in the history of detection-parody.

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DISCOVERY—*and a strange "discovery" indeed • Who would have believed it?—this strange poem by the famous author of* THIS SIDE OF PARADISE, THE GREAT GATSBY, *and* TENDER IS THE NIGHT . . .

THE BOY WHO KILLED HIS MOTHER

by F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

In a dear little vine-covered cottage
On Forty-second Street
A butcher once did live who dealt
In steak and other meat.

His son was very nervous
And his mother him did vex
And she failed to make allowance
For his matricide complex.

And now in old Sing Sing
You can hear that poor lad sing:

Just a boy that killed his mother
I was always up to tricks
When she taunted me I shot her
Through her chronic appen*dix*
I was always very nervous
And it really isn't fair

I bumped off my mother but never no other
Will you let me die in the chair?

He was only sixteen and a fraction
A' had ne'er been ail in his life
He had scarcely been fired from his high school
For raping the principal's wife.

Now he sits in the law's foulest dungeons
Instead of his family's embrace
Oh, how would you like it your ownself
If you stared the hot seat in the face.

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So write Franklin D. if you can
To send him to old Mattewan:

Just a boy that killed his mother
Now he's in a sorry fix
Since he up one day and plugged her
Through her perfect thirty-six
It was no concern of no one's
And his trial wasn't fair

The fact that he shot her was a family matter
Will you let him die in the chair?

Do you think that our civilization
Should punish an innocent lad?
Why, he said to the judge in the courtroom
He was aiming the gun at his dad.

But the judges denied his petition
And at dawn on the 9th of July
Unless Governor Roosevelt shows kindness
Gus Schnlitski must certainly die.

And the death house once again
Does ring to this refrain:

Just a boy that killed his mother
With a brace of stolen Colts
On July 9 they'll fill me
With a hundred thousand volts
It was dope that made me do it
Otherwise I wouldn't dare

'Twas ten grains of morphine that made me an orphine
Will you let me die in the chair?

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A story about the world of high fashion, and of the loveliest model that ever postured on a staircase or pirouetted on a stage . . . a story that will haunt you . . .

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL MANNEQUIN IN THE WORLD

by NORMAN DANIELS

MACCAMPBELL, SECOND OFFICER of the British liner en route from Southampton to New York, settled himself in the deck chair next to mine. Perhaps some of the passengers might have considered this rather impudent, even for a Second Officer, but MacCampbell and I were old friends. I'd crossed with him at least twenty times.

"Well, now," he said, with that faint, delightful burr of the highlands, "what's it to be next season for the ladies, Mr. Dunbar? Long skirts, short skirts, or are they all going to wear pants which, I think, is quite likely, though there are those who shouldn't."

"There won't be much change this coming season, Mac," I said.

He signed. "Must be a great pleasure looking at all those models, all those beautiful girls. Is it true they don't eat?"

"Well, not much," I admitted with a smile. "They can't afford a wrinkle of fat anywhere."

"Ah, yes. Too skinny for my tastes—but then a man mustn't be too fussy about those things, eh, Mr. Dunbar? I still say you have a job every man in the world would envy."

"Models all begin to look the same after a while," I said. "You get so you don't even see them—only the dresses they wear."

"I know what you mean—there are times I don't even see the ship I'm working on. That's what too much of even a good thing does. You've been at this a long time, Mr. Dunbar, haven't you? Must have crossed with me twenty times or more. And then there are the other ships—and the planes. I'm a seafaring man myself. Can't see the six-hundred-miles-an-hour planes that show a passenger only a lot of sky and clouds. Oh, yes, they get there faster, but does every man need all that time he saves? You don't fly much, eh?"

"Rarely," I said. "I like to make friends, mingle with passengers, study the styles as they're worn by

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the cash customers. And, as you say, who needs all the time you save by flying?"

"Well," he said, stirring himself reluctantly, "I'd best be getting some sleep." He stood up and looked out to sea for a moment; then he adjusted his cap and smiled at me.

"Good night," I said.

"Night, sir. I hope you find what you're looking for."

He walked away and I sat there, somewhat amazed that he knew I was looking for someone. Could it be so obvious? And did others think so too? I began to feel a bit embarrassed. Maybe I had been looking at all the slender, aloof young women too hard.

But old MacCampbell was wrong about one thing. I was looking, no doubt about that. I'd been looking for twenty-two years now—but what I was looking for, I hoped and prayed I would never find.

I was looking for Ramona, and if and when I found her, I fully believed I would kill myself—if I didn't lose my senses first.

Once on every voyage I sat in the night gloom of a lonely deck and let my thoughts go back. It was easy to do because it brought back to freshness the memory I had of her—and a lot of other memories too . . . the kind of memories I wish had rotted with the years and blown away like so much dust.

I became a couturier—which meant I designed and sold dresses—not by chance, not even by choice, but by inheritance. My father, and his before him, had operated Dunbar's, and, in our American way, had become as famous as Dior, Fath, Balenciaga, and more recently the Italians who were crowding into our business.

It was I who discovered Ramona. Of course, that wasn't her name. Models never use their real names—they select glamorous ones to match the profession, to stand out, so that if they become famous the names are easy to remember.

Ramona was a lovely thing the first day she walked into the shop—not gawky and nervous like so many beginners. From that first day she had been polished, flawless, absolutely sure of herself.

She was undoubtedly the most beautiful model in the world, and here she was, ready for us, fully capable of changing from her sleek tailored suit of Chinese silk into a formal evening gown and walking down the aisle or across the stage to the oohs and aahs of buyers from all over the world.

"I am quite alone," she told me as I stared at her goggle-eyed—yes, goggle-eyed because, while I was a young man so accustomed to beauty that I no longer noticed it, this girl outshone all the others; she would have commanded attention and admiration from the most jaded male on earth.

"I'm afraid we don't pay too much," I stammered. "The world is at war and high fashion is not the

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thing at this time. Also, materials are difficult to obtain and we've lost so many women to the Wacs and Waves."

"I will earn my way, Mr. Dunbar," she told me. "I will make myself valuable to your firm. I chose Dunbar's because I consider you to be the best, and the best is where I belong. The money does not matter so much now."

Naturally I gave her a job. To have turned down this beautiful creature would have been the decision of a stupid man afflicted with blindness.

I began her in our usual training course, which other girls endured for six months. Ramona required only a few days. The polish and magnificence that a high-fashion model must have was inborn with her, instinctive. She had the rare ability to put on an evening gown and compel buyers to fall into her formal mood. She could wear a sports outfit and make them think of polo and tennis. She even filled out a skimpy bathing suit so that you could almost hear the rolling surf in faroff places. Ramona had the gift to create a perfect mood for every costume she wore; she brought into the showroom the glamor that each outfit was designed to suggest. As a result, she was putting over even doubtful designs before she'd been with us a month.

Naturally I regarded her as my protégé. I was 32 at that time and unmarried by choice. I had no time for women—there were, perhaps, too many of them in my life. But I knew from the moment of Ramona's entrance to my office that she was for me and that no one else would ever do.

My ambition was to convince her of this. So I gave her choice assignments, I let her do advertising work at enormous fees, and I paid her three times as much as any of our other models received. She accepted all this with a sweet lovely smile that sent my silly wits reeling.

I haven't described her, have I? There's a reason. The truth is, she is almost impossible to depict in mere words. Her type of beauty is so rare and fragile that words simply don't seem to fit, not even a poet's. To say she was incredibly beautiful is correct, but still understated. Ramona was so high above all the other girls she worked with that they never showed the slightest trace of jealousy or animosity; they knew her perfection was unattainable for them and didn't even aspire to it.

She had the ethereal grace that characterizes the best mannequin. But grace was only a part of her beauty. She had high cheekbones and nearly almond-shaped eyes, with a small nose and jet-black hair drawn back, but not severely. The eyes themselves were a strange blue, like an unusual mixture of azure tints from an artist's brush which might have baffled the artist himself to describe. They were steady eyes.

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They moved little, but seemed to see everything—and I hoped they saw me.

I didn't make a play for her until she was an important part of the world of *haute couture* and on an even footing with me and my already established reputation.

The night I decided to ask her to dinner at the most fashionable restaurant in New York, I first showed her a satin evening gown, strapless and a season ahead of the 1944 fashions, which were excellent in themselves; but this creation was out of the ordinary. Ramona took one look at it and was entranced.

"Lou, never in my life have I seen a gown like this. May I try it on?"

"Of course," I said, as if it didn't matter at all. "But a girl like you in a gown like this should be seen by more than a mere dressmaker like me. Suppose we make a night of it at the Grandee Room at the Park."

"Oh, yes," she said. "Yes, Lou, by all means. Please wait here until I get into it so we can be sure it is perfect. You will wait, Lou?"

"Always," I said, and hoped she would understand that in the way I meant it. But she didn't. She merely smiled, then disappeared into one of the fitting rooms.

When she came out I was as breathless as if I were a sophomore who had dated the prettiest and most popular girl in school. I think I uttered some sort of cry. I'm not sure. But at that moment, if I never was before, I was lost. Before then I had considered myself hopelessly in love with her, but now I knew that hopeless was an inadequate word.

With her jet-black hair, the black satin gown blended exquisitely. It was strapless— to reveal her perfectly formed shoulders which were as white as the petals of a gardenia. The gown was snug, and it molded itself to her figure as if she had been born for it.

We were a sensation at the most fashionable room in town—that is, Ramona was a sensation. People I didn't know came over to tell her how lovely she looked, and even those women usually beset by jealousy showed no green cast in their eyes; they knew they could never hope to be as lovely as Ramona, so they were not envious beyond a sigh of resignation.

We danced, but only once. She said dancing made her very tired and she was afraid it pulled at the gown in the wrong places. She even sat erect in her chair so that she wouldn't spoil the sculptured lines.

In this soft light, purposely meant to flatter women, she seemed incredible in her sheer loveliness. I wasn't certain if she enjoyed herself. Oh, the silent applause of the crowd, yes, and she literally beamed when they told her how much they admired her and the gown. But she was a very stiff dancer and not much of a conversationalist. Still, that didn't matter to me. A fantastically beautiful woman like Ramona did-

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n't have to dance, or even talk. All she had to do, as far as I was concerned, was to exist.

I realized she'd been with the firm nearly a year and I knew no more about her than on the day she walked in. I thought it was time to get acquainted on a more personal basis.

"Ramona, I've often meant to ask. Where do you come from? Who are you, really, and who are your parents?"

"You're getting personal, Lou," she said.

"I know. But I mean to for a very special reason. Who are you, Ramona?"

"I was born in New York—right here in town," she said. "My parents are . . . dead. Who they were doesn't matter because they were not much—wonderful people, but not important. As for me . . . there's really nothing to tell. I knew when I was eight that I wanted to be part of the world of fashion. I worked at it, quite hard. I studied everything I could on the subject, but I realized quickly that my chief asset was my figure. So I concentrated on learning how to wear clothes, not create them. Others could do that."

"Yes, others could," I agreed. "Right now you're the highest paid model in the United States. Did you know that?"

"I had such an idea," she said. "You've been very good to me."

"There's a reason," I said. "Two reasons. One is strictly business. Do you know that by your showing this gown tonight I could sell a hundred of them for fabulous sums? You, my dear, can sell clothes like no other woman. We pay you well because you're worth every cent of it. But this gown—no, on second thought, I don't think I'll put it into production. I think it's you, Ramona. I doubt that anyone else could ever do it justice after tonight. And so—it's yours with my compliments."

She reached across the table and touched me lightly on the back of the hand—just a resting of her fingertips; but her smile was worth a dozen of those gowns.

"You must understand, darling," she said, "that I am not capable of love. That is a strange thing to say, but it's true. Some day, perhaps soon, it may be a different story—but now I have only one world, one love."

"You did say some day?" I asked.

"Yes. I know that before too long my figure will change—there will be tiny wrinkles, less vitality and youth. Then I will have more time and, perhaps, more inclination, for love. That is what you were going to tell me, isn't it? That you are in love with me."

"I guess I showed it," I said self-consciously. "I certainly feel it enough to give myself away to anyone. Yes, I'm very much in love with you, but I'm willing to wait, Ramona—I know what your work

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means to you. But, Ramona, one thing I must be sure of—that there's no one else."

She smiled. There was laughter in this girl, but it never came out. She was too trained to be emotionless, to be as formal as the mannequin walk she executed so well. And I had to be content with that one smile, that enigmatic smile . . .

Things might have gone on well enough. We were both too busy to think of much more than our work, though she still continued to confuse me with her loveliness. She never shirked her part at our showroom and if an outside advertising appointment interfered, she canceled it.

Then one evening, when my uncle took her out to dinner, Chuck Norton met Ramona. I had had to fly to Paris for a showing. Uncle Paul was old enough, and more, to be her father, and while he appreciated beauty as much as the next man, he wasn't affected by it as I was—or, as it turned out, as Chuck Norton was.

Chuck and the fashion world couldn't have been farther apart. He manufactured tanks—the kind which were crossing the Remagen Bridge and rapidly ending the war in Europe. He was already making plans to move into the manufacture of heavy farm and construction equipment. His financial standing placed him high in the millionaire class. He had a wife and four children, the oldest of whom was fourteen. His wife was not "society"—she devoted herself to her family, and when Chuck went out to important social functions, he usually went alone.

He knew Uncle Paul well, and when he saw Ramona with him, Chuck came directly to their table. Uncle Paul had no recourse but to invite him to sit with them, and that began it. By the time I returned from Europe, Chuck had an overwhelming passion for this girl.

I heard about it from Uncle Paul, who was beside himself with worry because he'd introduced them and felt to blame. Chuck was already hinting about leaving his family, his friends—anything, so long as he could be with Ramona.

He took her everywhere—and never in the same gown. At the races she was dressed in the smartest outdoor creations my firm had ever designed. At cocktails she was astoundingly beautiful in a variety of gowns, one for each occasion. Some of them were ours, some Chuck bought for her. I heard that he'd contracted with the best Parisian shops to send over a fortune in fabulous dresses—for Ramona alone. He gave them to her and I'd never seen her so excited.

She began showing up late for work. Some days she didn't come in at all, but I never had the heart—or the courage—to remind her that she still worked for me.

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I couldn't imagine, even wildly, that Chuck actually intended to leave his family; but later on I found out it was true enough. He simply didn't care. His wife and children, to whom he had been so deeply devoted, seemed to have been almost wiped out of his mind. He never went home, he was oblivious of the warnings and pleas of his friends, and he would have welcomed his wife's offer of a divorce. If it wasn't forthcoming, I guessed he would start an action himself and get the divorce no matter what he had to do.

I was so worried about it that I called Ramona into my office late one afternoon. In the clothes closet I had a dark-red velvet gown waiting. I'd seen this color on Ramona before, and it highlighted every beautiful asset she possessed. I thought I might need the powers of persuasion that such a gown could command.

"You're seeing too much of Chuck Norton," I told her bluntly, because I was angry. "He's making a mess of his life over you, Ramona. I doubt you're aware of that, but he is."

"I cannot be blamed for it," she said coolly. "I did not encourage Mr. Norton, and I can't drop him simply because people think we are having an affair."

"Aren't you?" I asked her.

"No," she said, as simply as that.

I looked at her steadily for a moment. "You're not a liar, Ramona. At least, I've never known you to be, so I'll take your word for it. Is Chuck going to divorce his wife?"

"Not that I know of, Lou, and I would not permit him to do so if he suggested it. You see, I don't love him."

I nodded. "Do you love anyone, Ramona?"

"No," she said calmly. "No, Lou, I do not. If I were to fall in love, it would be with you because you're sweet and nice to be with, and you're young and gay. I need youth and gaiety. I lie awake nights thinking of the time when I will have neither, and I cannot bear to think of it."

"All right," I said, "prove that. Go out with me tonight—on this short notice—and cancel your date with Chuck. Oh, I know you have one."

"Lou, I can't do that," she said.

I held up my hand to silence her and, with a smile, I went to the closet and took out the dark-red gown. She uttered the nearest thing to an ecstatic cry that I had ever heard from her. It was more of a squeal, but there was no mistaking her rapture.

She couldn't wait to try it on, and when she did, and pirouetted before me, I was lost all over again. I knew at that moment that I could not let anyone else have her. I felt certain Ramona would never fall in love. She simply couldn't, but that didn't matter any more. I could fall

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in love, and my love would be enough.

Not another word was spoken about her date with Chuck. I kept evening clothes in an office closet, and I got into them while Ramona prepared herself with that exquisite display of care she always used on makeup, hairdo, and dress arrangement. Nothing could be out of place—no wisp of material, not a single hair, not one speck too much in the rouged lines of her mouth. I had never seen her more beautiful.

We went to the theater first—some musical comedy. That was all she liked, because of the gowns and costumes. I was too aware of her to enjoy anything else, or even to know what was happening on the stage.

After the performance we went to one of the night clubs where the cuisine was exceptional and the patrons were celebrities and famous people.

As before, she danced once and that was all. She was the stiffest dancer I had ever guided around a floor and yet her mannequin walk was a work of art, graceful to behold, precise as a machine. We had returned to our table when Chuck came in. I don't know how he learned where we were, but he came over, appropriated a chair from an adjoining table without asking permission, and sat down heavily.

He was fifteen years older than I was, a bulky man, and tonight he was sweating profusely. He kept dabbing at his forehead.

"I have something to say," he muttered finally, his eyes on Ramona. "Tonight I told my wife that if she refused to grant me a divorce, I'd frame one and smear her from one end of the country to the other. I told her she could have all the money she wanted, and custody of the kids. I don't care if I ever see them again. This is all for you, Ramona. I want your promise that you'll marry me when I'm legally free. Will you do that?"

I restrained a grin because I knew what Ramona's answer would be. Chuck couldn't get any further with her, on a serious basis, than I had. But she surprised me.

Ramona blessed him with one of her rare full smiles and she reached both hands across the table to grasp his.

"We will live in Paris, my darling. Tell me we will live there."

"We'll live anywhere on this earth you want to live," he said. "By the time my divorce is final, Paris will have been cleaned up after the Occupation and it will be as it used to be. Nothing can really change Paris—and we'll live there. You can have everything you wish. Money is no object."

"Then, yes, Chuck," she said. "Yes, by all means."

I said nothing—not a word, not even the customary congratulations.

Not then—not ever. I got up from the table and walked out, and Chuck slipped into my chair and I don't think either of them knew I'd

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gone, or had ever been there. I went home, to a lonely penthouse apartment, and found it unbearable. I was sorry for myself, sorrier for Chuck's wife and children, and I was slowly developing an uncontrollable rage at Ramona.

She had told Chuck she'd go with him. She'd consented to marry him, but she had never once mentioned being in love with him. She was in love with his money, his millions, because they could buy her all the creations Paris was going to offer the world again as soon as the war was over.

She knew very well that if she married me we'd never live in Paris. I was an intense rival of the French couturiers and my business kept me in New York most of the time. I would have been unfaithful to my conscience and my career if I let Ramona roam the Paris shops and buy their gowns. I suspected that my House of Fashion was not good enough for her any more. During the war, with Paris out of business, I was the best; but she sensed that fashion was already turning its sharp little eyes in the direction of France.

I stood the apartment as long as I could, and then I went out for a walk. It lasted a long time and when I turned into my shop, I was tired, but calm. Coldly calm because, in the solitude of that walk I had decided what I must do.

Ramona had already destroyed my life. That I could accept, but I couldn't stand by and let her destroy the happiness of four wonderful children and a devoted wife. Chuck was out of his mind to desert them, but I realized he couldn't help himself. Ramona's beauty, her cold aloofness, had entrapped him even more than it had me.

But that was over now. I'd created Ramona. It was up to me to destroy her. Perhaps, by morning, I might have been more reasonable in my judgment and my decision, but at three o'clock in the morning I was still mentally at the table with Chuck and Ramona, hearing my future with her shattered, hearing how Chuck would abandon his family for her.

Perhaps it wouldn't have happened if she hadn't returned to the shop; but she had a key and she wanted to change out of the dark-red velvet gown. I heard her in an upstairs dressing room. That was when I made up my mind—with the abruptness of a click.

I took the gun out of my desk drawer and walked up the steps.

They were formal steps, a curved staircase down which the models came, wearing my new creations. It had highly polished bannisters and hardwood steps that shone with a rich warm light to reflect the sweep of the gowns. I had tried carpeting on the stairs, but the effect wasn't the same, so I'd had the carpeting removed.

I reached the top of the staircase and went on into the long hallway off which the twenty dressing rooms

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were located. Ramona came out of one, halfway down the hall. She was still wearing the dark-red gown. Blood-red, in this faint light.

She saw the gun in my hand and she stood perfectly still.

"You can't do it," I said. "You can't wreck five lives, to say nothing of mine. I will not permit it. I'm responsible for your being here and I must share in your guilt if you do this terrible thing. I can't let you, Ramona."

"You are an utter fool, Lou," she said, in a voice that didn't contain the slightest trace of fear. "No one can kill me!"

"I can," I told her. "I've been a fool, but that's over now. Will you let Chuck go?"

"I will do what I wish to do and nothing else," she said. "That is how I am. You cannot change me, Lou. Not you, nor that gun you are holding."

I aimed the weapon and pulled the trigger. I did so deliberately. There was no frantic desire in me to kill her—just a calm resolve to do so.

I fired three times and I couldn't have missed at that close range.

Her face didn't change. There was no contortion of terror or agony. She just stood there a second or two and then toppled over. I threw the gun away. I ran to her and knelt by her side and I must have seemed an awful fool, kissing her and holding her in my arms.

I've never been very good at such things as finding heartbeats, or judging how badly a person has been hurt. I knew I had to do something to save her. I ran into the largest dressing room, where there was a telephone, and I called the police. I urged them to send an ambulance and told them I would be at the front door to let them in—but hurry, please, hurry!

I started down the steps and then I thought I might save a few precious seconds if Ramona were near the front door so they could whisk her to the hospital at once. I returned to the hallway and bent down. I slipped my arms under her and lifted her. She seemed to weigh so little. I was at the head of the stairs when something hit the wooden step with a clatter. I looked down and the nightmare which has haunted me ever since began.

An arm—a lovely slender feminine arm had fallen on the stairs. It was joined by a leg, then another arm, then—God help me!—a head which bounced when it hit and teetered on the edge of the step with the face looking up at me. The face of Ramona.

It was exactly as it had been in life. Bold, alive, beautiful. I dropped the torso, which was still in my arms; then I backed up and sat down in the middle of the hall and started screaming.

They didn't pay much attention to my story. They gave me drugs and ice-cold packs and special baths and even shock treatments. These

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things only served to pass the time away. I had no need for them. No one ever mentioned Ramona. I heard that Chuck went back to his family, penitent and ashamed . . .

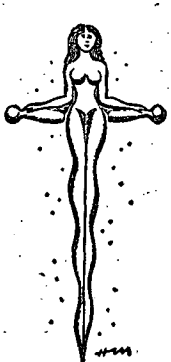
That's why I travel so much now. That's why I became—let's call it, a fashion scout. I attend every fashion opening. My opinions are respected. I'm extremely well paid for my judgment and advice—but that's why I travel.

I am looking for Ramona—and hoping that I never meet her. Yet I must keep searching for her as intently as if my love had never died. As if she had been real—as everyone else believed she was real. As if she hadn't gone back into a mannequin world of paint and false hair and wire and plaster . . .

And now, as I sit on the darkened deck which is rapidly cooling off—for while this is summer it is also the middle of an ocean and the winds can be strong and chill—I give a wild start as my heart begins to pound madly whenever a tall slim figure appears on deck and walks by slowly, gracefully, with something akin to a mannequin walk. My nerves don't stop seething until the figure passes and I see that she is blonde or redhead or graying.

But it's never Ramona.

There are even morbid and discouraged moments when I would swear that Ramona never was and never will be again.



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first publication in the U. S.

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **JULIAN SYMONS**

TITLE: ***Credit to Shakespeare***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Francis Quarles

LOCALE: London

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *This first-night performance of "Hamlet" was notable for various reasons: one was the scandalous background of some of the cast; another was such stuff as Shakespeare never dreamed on . . .*

"IT WON'T DO," SAID ACIDULOUS dramatic critic, Edgar Burin, to private detective, Francis Quarles. "The fact is that this young producer's too clever by half. You can't play about with a masterpiece like *Hamlet*."

Burin wrinkled his thin nose in distaste as the curtain rose on Act Five.

This *Hamlet* first night was notable because the production was by a young man still in his twenties named Jack Golding, who had already obtained a reputation for eccentric but ingenious work. It was also notable because of the casting. Golding had chosen for his Hamlet a star of light comedy named Giles Shoreham. His Laertes, John Farrimond, had been given his part on the strength of Golding's intuition, since Farrimond had played only one walk-on part in the West End.

Olivia Marston as the Queen and Roger Peters as the King were acknowledged Shakespearean actors, but their choice was remarkable in another sense. For the name of

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Olivia Marston, an impressive personality on the stage and a notorious one off it, had been linked by well-informed gossip with those of Peters, Farrimond, and even with Jack Golding himself.

Those were the rumors. What was certain was that Olivia, a tall handsome woman in her forties, had been married a few weeks ago to Giles Shoreham who was fifteen years her junior.

This agreeably scandalous background was known to most of the first-night audience, who watched eagerly for signs of tension among the leading players. So far, however, they had been disappointed of anything more exciting than a tendency on the part of Giles Shoreham to fluff his lines.

By Act Five the audience had settled to the view that this was, after all, only another performance of *Hamlet*, marked by abrupt changes of mood from scene to scene, and by the producer's insistence on stressing the relationship between Hamlet and the Queen.

So the curtain rose on Act Five. Golding had taken unusual liberties with the text, and Burin sucked in his breath with disapproval at the omission of the Second Gravedigger at the beginning of this scene. Giles Shoreham, slight and elegant, was playing now with eloquence and increased confidence.

Then came the funeral procession for Ophelia and Hamlet's struggle with Laertes in Ophelia's grave. Here one or two members of the audience sat forward, thinking they discovered an unusual air of reality as Shoreham and Farrimond struggled together, while Roger Peters, as the King, restrained them and Olivia Marston looked on.

Shoreham, Quarles thought, had gained impressiveness as the play went on. With Osric he was now splendidly ironical, and in the opening of the duel scene he seemed to dominate the stage for all his slightness of stature compared with Farrimond's height and breadth of shoulder.

This scene was played faster than usual, and Quarles vaguely noted cuts in the speeches before the duel began. There was Laertes choosing his poisoned foil; there was the poisoned cup brought in and placed on a side table. Then foils were flashing, Hamlet achieved a hit, took the cup to drink and put it down without doing so, with the speech, "I'll play this bout first; set it by a while."

Then another hit, and the Queen came over to wipe Hamlet's brow, picked up the cup, and drank. Laertes wounded Hamlet with his poisoned foil, and Hamlet snatched it from him and wounded Laertes. The Queen, with a cry, sank down as she was returning to the throne, and at once there was a bustle around her.

Osric and two attendants ran to her. The King moved upstage in her direction.

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"How does the Queen?" Hamlet asked, and the King made the appropriate reply. "She swoons to see them bleed."

There was a pause.

Should not the Queen reply?

Quarles searched his memory while Burin grunted impatiently by his side.

Hamlet repeated, "How does the Queen?" and knelt down by her side.

The pause this time was longer.

Then Hamlet looked up, and on his face was an unforgettable expression of mingled anguish and irresolution. His lips moved, but he seemed unable to speak. When the words came they seemed almost ludicrous after the Shakespearean speech they had heard.

"A doctor," he cried. "Is there a doctor in the house?"

The other players looked at him in consternation. The curtain came down with a rush. Five minutes later, Roger Peters appeared before it and told the anxious audience that Miss Marston had met with a serious accident.

When Burin and Quarles came onto the stage, the players were standing together in small, silent groups. Only Giles Shoreham sat apart in his red court suit, head in hands.

A man bending over Olivia Marston straightened up and greeted Quarles, who recognized him as the the well-known pathologist, Sir Charles Palquist.

"She's dead," Palquist said, and his face was grave. "She took cyanide, and there's no doubt she drank it from that cup. Somebody knocked the cup over and it's empty now, but the smell is still plain enough."

"Now I wonder who did that?" Quarles said. But his meditation on that point was checked by the arrival of his old friend, brisk, grizzled Inspector Leeds.

The Inspector had a wonderful capacity for marshaling facts. Like a dog snapping at the heels of so many sheep, he now extracted a story from each of the actors on the stage, while Quarles stood by and listened.

When the Inspector had finished, this was the result. The cup from which Olivia Marston had taken her fatal drink was filled with red wine and water. The cup had been standing ready in the wings for some time, and it would have been quite easy for anybody on the stage—or, indeed, anybody in the whole company—to drop poison into it unobserved.

As for what had happened on the stage, the duel scene had been played absolutely to the script up to the point where Peters, as the King, said, "She swoons to see them bleed." The Queen should then have replied to him, and her failure to do so was the reason for the very obvious pause that had occurred.

Shoreham, as Hamlet, then improvised by repeating his question, "How does the Queen?" and went

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on his knees to look at her, thinking that she felt unwell. But when he saw her face, half turned to the floor, suffused and contorted, he knew that something was seriously wrong. Shoreham was then faced with a terrible problem.

Clasping his hands nervously, white-faced, Shoreham said to the Inspector, "I could have got up and gone on as though nothing had happened—after all, in the play the Queen was dead—and within ten minutes the play would have been over. That way we should have completed the performance." Shoreham's large eyes looked pleadingly round at the other members of the cast. "But I couldn't do it. I couldn't leave her lying there—I just couldn't."

"Since the poor lady was dead, it didn't make any difference," said the Inspector in his nutmeg-grater voice. "Now, this lady became Mrs. Shoreham a few weeks ago, I believe? And she was, I imagine, a pretty wealthy woman?"

Giles Shoreham's head jerked up. "Do you mean to insinuate—?"

"I'm not insinuating, sir—I'm merely stating a fact."

Quarles coughed. "I think, Inspector, that there may be other motives at work here."

He took the Inspector aside and told him of the rumors that linked the names of Farrimond, Peters, and Golding with Olivia Marston. The Inspector's face lengthened as he listened.

"But that means any of the four might have had reason to kill her."

"If they felt passionately enough about her—yes. Which would you pick?"

The Inspector's glance passed from Farrimond, big and sulky, to the assured, dignified, gray-haired Peters and on to the young producer Jack Golding, who looked odd in his lounge suit and thick horn-rimmed spectacles among this collection of Elizabethans. "I'm hanged if I know."

"May I ask a few questions?" The Inspector assented. Quarles stepped forward. "A small point perhaps, gentlemen, but one I should like to clear up. The cup was found on its side with the liquid spilled out of it. Who knocked it over?"

There was silence.

With something threatening behind his urbanity Quarles said, "Very well. Let us have individual denials. Mr. Shoreham?"

Shoreham shook his head.

"Mr. Farrimond?"

"Didn't touch the thing."

"Mr. Peters?"

"No."

"Any of you other gentlemen who were on the stage? Or did anyone see it done?" There were murmurs of denial. "Most interesting. Miss Marston replaced the cup on the table and then some unknown agency knocked it on its side."

The Inspector was becoming impatient. "Can't see what you're

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getting at, Quarles. Do you mean she didn't drink out of it?"

Quarles shook his head. "Oh, no, she drank from it, poor woman. Mr. Shoreham, did you know that you had some rivals for your wife's affections? And did she ever hint that any one of them was particularly angry when she decided to marry you?"

A wintry suggestion of a smile crossed Shoreham's pale face. "She once said she'd treated everybody badly except me and that one of these days she'd get into trouble. I thought she was joking."

"Mr. Golding." The producer started. "I am not a Shakespearean scholar, but I seem to have noticed more cuts in this *Hamlet* than are usually made."

"No," said Golding. The thickness of his spectacles effectively masked his expression. "*Hamlet* is very rarely played in full. I haven't made more cuts than usual, I've simply made different ones."

"In this particular scene, for instance," Quarles went on, "you've cut the passage early—where the King drinks and sends somebody across to Hamlet with the cup."

"That's right. It seems to me an unnecessary complication."

"What about the rest of the scene? Any cuts in that?"

"None at all. After what you saw we adhere to the standard printed version."

Quarles bent his whole great body forward and said emphatically, "Doesn't that suggest something to you, Mr. Golding? Remember that the cup was knocked over and emptied. Do you understand?"

On Golding's face there was suddenly amazed comprehension.

The Inspector had been listening with increasing irritation. "What's all this got to do with the murder? Why the devil was that cup emptied?"

"*Because the murderer thought he would have to drink from it.* Remember what happens after the Queen died, crying that her drink was poisoned. Laertes tells Hamlet that he has been the victim of treachery. Hamlet stabs the King. And what happens *then*, Mr. Peters?"

Roger Peters, truly kingly in his robes, was smiling. "Hamlet puts the poisoned cup to the King's mouth and forces him to drink."

"Correct. In fact, Shoreham stopped the play before that point was reached. But the murderer couldn't be sure that Shoreham's instinct as an actor wouldn't impel him to go on and say nothing. And then what would have happened? The King would also have had to drink from the poisoned cup. You couldn't risk that, could you, Mr. Peters?"

Peters' hand was at his mouth. "No. You are a clever man, Mr. Quarles."

"So there was only one person who would have had any motive for knocking over that cup."

"Only one person. But you are a

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little late, Mr. Quarles. I had two capsules. I swallowed the second a few seconds ago. I don't think, anyway, that I would have wanted to live without Olivia."

Peters' body seemed to crumple suddenly. Farrimond caught him as he fell.

"Well," said Burin, the dramatic critic, afterward, "you had no evidence, Quarles, but that was a pretty piece of deduction."

"I was merely the interpreter," Quarles said mock-modestly. "The credit for spinning the plot and then unraveling it goes to someone much more famous."

"Who's that?"

"William Shakespeare."

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: KYLE MONTGOMERY

TITLE: *The Rules of the Game*

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *The Waggoner Twins, old Matt and Melisma, played a curious little game—a game that had its own very special rules . . . mayhem and old lace.* (*portrait-illustrations on pages 100 and 101 by the author*)

THE NIGHT MATTHEW WAGGONER tripped, he tumbled 19 steps and lay in a sprawling heap at the bottom. Oddly enough, he did not scream. It was too much of a surprise.

When it happened, the first words spoken by his sister were, "Well now, fancy that—it worked."

Gathering the ruffled hems of her nightclothes, she slipped from her bedroom, tiptoed to the banisters, and called down to him, "Matt, dear, are you still alive?"

An irascible outburst assured her he was very much alive, and furious.

Melisma giggled.

Wagging her bird's-nest pouf of white hair, she fluttered to the top of the staircase. There she found one of Matt's felt scuffs and quickly pocketed it. Next, she peered down the stairs to see if the cat was still there. Although she hardly expected he would be, she wanted to be positive before descending to inspect the damage.

"Here, kitty, kitty—nice kitty."

"Bother that cat!" her brother snapped. "Get down here, Melly."

She did. Halfway down, she found the other scuff and pocketed it also. On looking up, she found Matt watching her. "Oh . . ." she said, and covered her gaping mouth with both hands.

Propped on his elbows, his scraggy head thrown back, Matt glowered at her. His wrinkled face was frozen in thought.

"Melisma," he finally asked, "did you do that, or was it an accident? Eh—speak up!"

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MELISMA WAGGONER

She lowered her eyes and nodded. "I did, Matt, dear."

"Are you sure?" he demanded.

"Why, Matt!" Her parchment cheeks flushed a delicate pink and her amber eyes became enormous, blinking back tears. Honest indignation quavered in her voice. "Of course I'm sure, Matthew. Do you think I would cheat? Why, the idea!"

"Humph!"

"Humph, indeed." She raised her hems and stepped over his scrawny legs. Her lips twitching with annoyance, she flounced to the umbrella stand, removed the scuffs from her robe, and threw them in. Then she returned to Matt, and arms folded, she frowned down at him. "You'll catch your death if you stay on that cold floor—here, let me help you."

"Leave me be! I can manage."

Softly tch-tching to herself, Melisma withdrew to sit on the bottom step. She hugged her knees and watched his sullen efforts to get back on his feet. Poor Matt, he was such a grouchy loser.

Poor Matt never made it to his feet. With an ear-splitting howl he informed Melisma that his ankle was either sprained or broken. "And don't sit there smiling," he bellowed. "Call the doctor. For all you know, I may be dying."

"Yes, dear." She rose to go to the telephone, paused, and looked back at him. "Do you really think so, Matt?"

"Think *what*?"

"That you're dying?"

"Don't be silly!" Then he peevishly thrust out his bony chin. "You haven't won yet, Melly."

"I know, dear," she murmured, and went to call the doctor.

Matt's fatal injury was diagnosed as a compound fracture of the right ankle—nothing to worry about. Still, because of his age, it was suggested that he be taken to the hospital, and that a private nurse be engaged. Both suggestions met with Melisma's immediate disapproval. She saw no reason why he could not remain at home, where she could tend to him. However, the doctor prevailed—possible complications, you know.

"Stuff and nonsense," Melisma persisted. "What complications? I've hidden the scuffs."

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The doctor's eyebrows shot up and his mouth opened, but past experience warned him to shut it immediately. He did so and slowly shook his head. Already the vagaries of the Waggoner Twins had driven his colleague to an early retirement and a heavy diet of tranquilizers.

The doctor swallowed and tried another approach. "If you wish, Miss Waggoner, I think I can arrange another room for you."

"O-oh . . ." Her crinkled face brightened. Then she sighed and declined with a nod. "There's Mrs. Potiphar and young Joseph."

"But I thought—"

"Matt's cats," she explained quickly, glancing toward the stairs.

"Oh—yes, the cats." The doctor tried to smile his understanding, but failed miserably. Earlier, when trying to learn the cause of Matt's accident, he had found himself a ping-pong ball in an exchange about a pair of scuffs, the rules of some kind of game, and those cats. Once was more than enough. He excused himself hurriedly and rushed off to the waiting ambulance.

Left alone in the old house, Melisma locked the front door and turned to the umbrella stand. She removed the scuffs, considered them thoughtfully, and then carried them upstairs to her room. There would be ample time tomorrow in which to burn them. No need to bother tonight.

Of course, according to the rules

MATT WAGGONER

of their little game, evidence was to be destroyed immediately. She thought that over. Hmm-m-m.

Then she shrugged, placed the scuffs on her night stand, and climbed into bed, pulling the coverlet about her. As she curled up for a sound night's sleep her thought returned to Matt. Before the doctor bundled him off, Matt had reminded her, "Don't forget, Melly, it's my turn next."

"I won't forget, dear," she said drowsily, and soon was asleep.

The next morning, light and fluffy in lilac and still a bit giddy from the elevator ride, Melisma crossed the Waiting Room and approached the nurse behind the counter.

"Hello," she said, a trifle breathless.

"Why, hello, yourself," the nurse

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replied. "You must be Miss Waggoner."

Melisma nodded and a tortoise-shell comb fell to the floor with a brittle tinkle. "Oh, dear," she gasped. With pathetic haste she picked it up and jabbed it back among her wispy strands of hair.

The nurse smiled again and beckoned to a blue-pinafored young woman. "Show Miss Waggoner to her brother's room."

"This way, please."

Her eyes sparkling with the anticipation of a child in a toy shop, Melisma bobbed along after the aide. They entered a wide corridor and Melisma gaped in amazement. It was like a dream where white figures moved swiftly in rubber-soled silence. A nurse, bearing a hypodermic on a tray, smiled blandly and passed by.

Melisma turned for a lingering look and collided with another nurse carrying a glucose bottle and a length of rubber tubing. "Gracious, how clumsy of me," she said, and hastened to rejoin the aide.

At Matt's room the young woman turned and walked away. Reluctant to leave the hallway, Melisma stood with her hand on the doorknob. How exciting it must be—how thrilling. Why, just imagine all the . . .

Behind her, a door opened and she whirled expectantly, in time to see an orderly emerge with a towel-draped pan. Melisma wrinkled her nose and skittered into Matt's room.

"It's about time! Where have you been?" Matt pushed himself up and glared over his plaster boot. "Oh—it's you, Melly."

She glanced nervously behind her. "Were you expecting—uh—assistance, dear?"

"One of these days. I thought you were that confounded nurse." He waggled his thumb at a nearby chair. "Over here, Melly—where I can keep my eyes on you."

She moved to the chair and perched on the edge.

"How are you, Matt?" she asked. "Are you comfortable? Have they —"

"Bosh! How can I be comfortable in a ton of plaster?"

Melisma stifled a grin with her fingers.

"What's so blasted funny?" he growled.

"N-nothing, dear." She got up and reached for his pillow. "Here, let me prop you up."

"Confound it, Melly, stop it! That's what I pay that nurse for." She moved to return to the chair, but Matt held her back. "Look at me, Melly, and tell the truth. Did you do it?"

Shaking her head wearily, she said, "Yes, Matt. I've already told —"

"How, then?" he asked, his nostrils flaring. "How did you do it? You weren't even near me. What did you use?"

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"Catnip," she said, and giggled at the expression on his face.

"What did you say?"

"Catnip."

"But—"

The door opened and in barged the nurse. "Here we are, Mr. Waggoner," she said in a high-pitched nasal voice. "Time for us to drink our tonic." She was a thick-set woman, with swarthy skin and angular features. Carrying a tray, she bore down on Matt with the deadly efficiency of an iceberg in open waters. Melisma cringed and edged away from the bed.

The nurse took a glass from the tray and shoved it into Matt's hand.

Sniffing the liquid suspiciously, he grinned at Melisma.

"That young fool of a doctor's idea," he explained. "Thinks I have to be coddled, so he feeds me strychnine."

"Does it really, Matt?" Melisma's eyes let up. "Does it *really* have strychnine in it?"

"Yep. Want some?"

"Mr. Waggoner!"

Two pairs of startled amber eyes snapped to meet the cold glare of the nurse's black eyes.

"We mustn't do that," the nurse continued. "We know we are kidding, don't we? Yes, we do. But we must think of how it sounds, right? Right."

She turned to Melisma. "The doctor thought a stimulant best—a mild tonic of Tincture of Nux Vomica."

Then back to Matt. "Come, come, drink it down. We mustn't dawdle."

Then to Melisma. "Mr. Waggoner must have his little joke—" She broke off and stared down her narrow nose at Melisma, as though seeing her for the first time. "You must be Melisma. Yes, of course. I'm Miss Swiggett, Mr. Waggoner's private nurse."

Her eyes shifted to Matt and back. "The doctor called me in, because of—you have seen him, haven't you, Miss Waggoner? No? Hmm. Well, I guess I'm not talking out of school. He asked me to remain with Mr. Waggoner for several weeks—that is, while he is here and later at home. Usually, mind you, I do not accept cases that are better handled by practical nurses, but—well-l, the doctor did ask *me*."

She paused, as if expecting a comment. None came. "Well. I'm sure we'll get along swimmingly. I believe you're called Melly? Right, Mr. Waggoner? That was what you said?"

She glanced at Matt for confirmation and missed Melisma's grimace of distaste. "Yes. I thought so. Now, Miss Melly, if there are any questions? No? Later, perhaps. I know I shall have some—about arrangements after we leave here. But that will be a week to ten days yet. More than enough time for me to prepare my list, right? Right."

"Right," Melisma repeated

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weakly, and collapsed in a lilac dither on the chair.

"*Right,*" Miss Swiggett said, injecting the proper tone of authority back into the word. Then she turned her starched back to Melisma and took the glass from Matt. "There, now, that wasn't so bad, was it? Of course not." She picked up the tray and marched with flat-footed forcefulness from the room.

"Well, I never—" Melisma began, staring after her. This will not do, she thought, this will not do at all. Closing her mouth, she looked around at Matt. Oh, dear, what was he up to now? "Matthew?"

He shushed her with a flick of his hand. Gazing at the middle distance, between the plaster boot and the door, he pensively tapped a fingernail against his teeth, while a smile, almost a leer, flickered in the creases that lined his lips and cheeks.

"Matthew?"

"Eh? Oh—Melly." He looked at her questioningly. "What was that you said?"

Melisma raised her eyes in exasperation, and then said, "Just what tomfoolery are you planning with that—that woman!"

She stabbed a forefinger toward the door, and, as if on cue, it opened and that woman entered. Miss Swiggett looked down her nose at the pointed finger.

"Did you want something, Miss Melly?" she asked.

"Did I—oh, no. I—that is, I . . ."

Matthew snickered, licked a finger and held it aloft. "She was checking the temperature, Miss Swiggett. Melly's a worrier about colds. Aren't you, old girl?"

Melisma's face blazed. She could have killed him, then and there, even if it wasn't her turn.

"I see," said Miss Swiggett, in a manner which implied everything else but. She flashed a chipped-ice smile. Then she clumped across to Matt's bed, made minor adjustments, and patted his hand. "Another of our little jokes, right?"

Matt beamed with almost beatific innocence.

Miss Swiggett patted his hand again. "Of course," she said, turning and going to a chair near the window. She removed a confessions magazine from the seat, sat down, withdrew a tongue depressor bookmark, and began to read. Her gradual lapse into finger-nibbling enjoyment was watched by narrowed amber eyes.

Minutes dripped damply in the room . . . while—slowly at first, then with quickening throbs—Melisma felt her budding dislike swell like a Japanese paper flower and burst open into a steamy, black orchid-like blossom of pure hatred. That woman wasn't going to interfere with their little game—not if Melisma could prevent it.

She excused herself early, anxious to return home. There were plans to be made, things to be done, before Miss Swiggett's impending invasion.

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Eight days later nearly everything was in readiness for the invasion. A bed had been installed for Matt in the downstairs study, and upstairs a spare bedroom had been aired for Miss Swiggett. As to the immediate problem of the nurse herself, Melisma was at a loss—not at a loss for ideas, but until she knew Matt's plans, she hesitated to use one of her own.

Surely, she thought, he wasn't going to invite that woman to play their game also? It hardly seemed probable. And yet, Matt could be clever when he put his mind to it, and sly.

Besides, she reminded herself, it was his turn. Hmm-m-m . . . Could it be? Was he planning to use the nurse in some way? After all, poor dear Matt would be restricted to that wheel chair for some time yet. Yes, that might be it—the sly one!

"If only I knew," she sighed.

She was sitting in the fusty-smelling, seldom-used front parlor. Twisting her fingers, smoothing the flounces of her puce frock, fretting with the antimacassars on the plum-colored, horsehair sofa, she impatiently awaited Matt's arrival.

From a nearby table, a clock, held aloft by gilt cherubs, daintily tchtched her unladylike fidgets.

Amber eyes glared. "Oh, be quiet!"

She arose from the sofa and padded across the parlor to the bay window. Parting the ecru lace curtains, she peered down the drive. Soon, she thought, they should certainly be here soon. It was more than thirty minutes since Miss Swiggett called to say they were on the way.

Suddenly her round amber eyes sparkled: would they use the siren? "It would be nice," she murmured as, with obstinate, childlike hope, she considered the possibility. "It would be very nice, indeed."

But, no, they only did that when they took someone away.

Sighing wistfully, she released the heirloom lace. Dust motes filtered from the curtains, shimmered in the beige sunlight, and sifted among the tousled strands of Melisma's hair.

"Phew," she said, fanning the air. If Miss Swiggett remained very long, the parlor would have to be thoroughly cleaned. Of course, if she didn't—well, that was another matter.

Melisma compressed her lips and sat on the window seat, once again composing herself for the wait. Rather, she tried to compose herself. Whatever could be the delay? Surely nothing could have happened?

"Now, Miss Melly, don't you worry. We shall be with him, and you know we shall make him comfy-cosy, don't you?"

"Fiddlesticks!" snapped Melisma, narrowing her eyes to sharp slits.

"Mrrrrrrr?"

Mrs. Potiphar, a huge orange Persian cat, paused en route to the sofa. Her head obliquely tilted, she re-

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peated the inquisitive purr. While she waited for a reply, her fully grown offspring, Joseph, Jr., strutted his black magnificence into the parlor.

"Oh, no," Melisma gasped.

Oh, yes. Mrs. Potiphar flicked with her tail and led Joseph, Jr. to the sofa.

"Please, Potty," Melisma pleaded, making shooing gestures as she scurried across the room. "I asked you, Potty. I asked you to keep young Joseph upstairs."

Mrs. Potiphar yawned; Joseph, Jr. kneaded the horsehair with his claws.

"I'm sorry, Potty, but—" Melisma scooped the cats under her arms. Mrs. Potiphar spat and Joseph, Jr. wiggled, but Melisma was determined. Rushing from the parlor, she transported their curled animosity down the hallway and into the butler's pantry. Joseph, Jr. hit the floor first and shot through into the kitchen. Mrs. Potiphar landed with an infuriated "Mrr-ow-auorr!"

"Yes, dear, I know," Melisma replied, closing the door.

Back at the window seat, she sat and snubbed her nose against the pane, searching the drive. Nothing. She turned away and glanced down her frock. "Mercy, what a mess." Anxious fingers picked and flicked cat hairs.

"Poor Potty, she'll be furious for weeks."

But it simply could not be avoided. It would be most tactless to have either of them underfoot when Matt arrived—especially young Joseph. Not that she thought Matt bore a grudge against the young cat, no. But he might still be sensitive about the cat's part in the "accident."

Furthermore, hadn't she burned the old scuffs and bought new ones for him? She had. Melisma smiled: she knew the rules. Once your finesse was exposed, you immediately destroyed the evidence—in this case, the catnip-treated scuffs. And yet—

She thoughtfully sucked the tip of her thumb. It was so confusing. True, she knew the rules, but how did they apply to young Joseph? Was he evidence also, or was he merely an innocent bystander?

"I don't know—I simply do not know."

But Matt would—he knew all the rules. He constantly had to rebuke her for violations—not intentional ones, of course. It was only that she became too eager, too impetuous, when it was her turn. And then she became guilty of—well, of little oversights. Yes, little oversights, not violations. It was a terrible failing, she knew, but that was the way she was. She could never hope to become as patient or as thorough as Matt. No, nor as clever.

Melisma's golden-hued eyes glittered with sisterly pride.

Yes, indeed, Matt was the clever one. *She* never would have thought

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of adding arsenic to *his* denture powders. Nor would she have had the patience to wait until he was all stuffy with a head cold. Even now, she was confused as to whether arsenic tasted or smelled garlicky, but Matt knew. That was why he had waited. And he had almost won. She never suspected a thing, but for one little detail. He had put too much arsenic in the powders and she had noticed the increase.

"The poor dear, he was so crestfallen," she murmured, "To have overlooked such a detail."

It vexed him so whenever he lost. But, as he often reminded her, any game—even their little game—must have its rules. Why, just imagine what might happen without them! There could be a frightful accident and then where would she be? With whom could she play?

"Definitely not that Miss Swiggett!" Melisma shook her wispy mane and compressed her lips. Never with that woman! Unless—unless—

She slanted her eyes toward the drive and a slow, shrewd grin creased her cheeks.

Of course! What a complete ninny she was. She should have seen it earlier—that first day at the hospital. She should have recognized the look on Matt's face. And she would have, if she hadn't allowed her dislike for that woman to mislead her.

How selfish of her—how blind! How childish of her not to have seen Matt's reason for permitting the nurse in their house. It was so simple, so obvious. He was thinking of both of them. They would have something to do while he was still confined. For the first time they could play on the same side.

How thoughtful of Matt, the old dear! A new version of the game to fill their time.

Eagerly, she faced the drive again. Sunlight ricocheting off its chrome, the ambulance was easing through the gates. "O-ooh," breathed Melisma. Poking her fingers into her hair, she squirmed off the window seat and scurried from the parlor.

When the ambulance rounded the bend by the chinaberry tree, Melisma was waiting beneath the porte-cochère. A soft smile of anticipation was on her lips.

Yes, indeed, it was going to be nice—so nice—to have someone else in the house, someone on the other side . . .

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a new story by

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**HELEN McCLOY**
TITLE:	***Murder Ad Lib***
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVE:	Dr. Basil Willing
LOCALE:	California
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*Actress Moira Shiel was a remarkable woman —psychiatrist Dr. Basil Willing knew that the moment she stepped out of the thunder and lightning of a California storm . . .*

SHE WAS A REMARKABLE WOMAN. Basil Willing recognized that the moment he saw her.

She opened the door of his beach cottage without knocking. Behind her a jagged streak of lightning split the night and vanished. Thunder roared above the steady drumming of the surf. An edge of white foam thrust its way up the sand; beyond, the ocean was a blackness—as void as if nothing were there, and never had been. Thunderstorms were rare in California, but when they came they were, like most things California, larger than life.

She was like a storm herself, all darkness and suddenness, all flash and tumult. Basil remembered that the words hurricane and houri have the same root.

"Sorry to bother you." Her voice was rich, deep, warm. "My telephone is dead. May I use yours? I live next door."

"Of course. Over there by the stairway."

She wore a silk sheath, shrill yellow like a flame in the dimly lighted room. Her sandals were gilt; her only jewel was a big round brooch on one shoulder, bits of coral and turquoise pieced together to form the image of a Nepalese god. An artful woman to combine yellow-pink and yellow-blue with yellow.

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"Damn! Your phone is dead too! What am I going to do now?"

"What's the trouble?"

"I'm Moira Shiel."

"The singer? Max and Moira?"

The team specialized in folk songs and satirical sketches. They were famous for their quickness in picking up each other's cues when they ad-libbed, as they often did, even on television. Moira was the better actor; Max, the better musician—he had perfect pitch.

She nodded. "I just had a phone call from the Santa Barbara police. Max's father was found dead there an hour ago, at nine o'clock. He lived alone. A neighbor heard his dog barking and called the police. They said he had died of a heart attack about eight thirty.

"They called me because they couldn't locate Max. They had tried the studio in Burbank first, but the night staff said that Max had left there alone, in his car, at six, telling everyone that he was driving to Santa Barbara to have dinner with his father. The police had also tried to call Max's house in Santa Cristina, a hundred miles south of Burbank, but there was no answer. His wife should have been there, but she wasn't.

"I don't want Max to hear this news suddenly, on his car radio. He adored his father. The shock would prostrate him for weeks, perhaps months. I got the Santa Barbara police to promise they would not release the news until I found Max, but they can't hold it back indefinitely. What shall I do? If your phone is also not working it means the line is down all along Malibu Beach. I may not be able to reach him for hours."

Basil glanced at his watch. "Ten after ten now. If he left Burbank at six, he should certainly be in Santa Barbara by this time. I suppose you could drive to Burbank, or to Los Angeles, and find a telephone that's working and—"

"I wouldn't dare leave my house for so long. The line may be fixed at any moment. A call might come through from Max and I'd miss it."

"Then why don't I take you home and drive to Los Angeles myself? I can give Max the message, if you'll tell me the most likely numbers to call."

There was a fire already burning on the hearth in her living room. She stood before it turning the pages of a small black address book. "First, his home number. That's one I always forget—I suppose, because I so rarely have occasion to use it."

"I always assumed you and Max were married," said Basil.

"Oh, no. He was married when we teamed up. Katie, his wife, is nice, but—"

She stopped at the sound of a car on the road that runs above the beach houses at Malibu. In a few moments footfalls were noisy on the wooden steps that led down to her

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house. She ran to the front door.

"Miss Shiel?" The man in the doorway was stocky and curt. The police. How could you always tell, even without the uniform?

"I'm Carson Dawes, Lieutenant, Los Angeles Police." He smiled at Basil. "Good evening, Dr. Willing. You probably don't remember me, but I've been attending your lectures on forensic psychiatry at the University."

"Dr. Willing?" Moira whirled to look at Basil. "You're a sort of policeman, too!"

"Sort of. I'm really a psychiatrist."

"Sorry to trouble you, Miss Shiel," Dawes went on. "But I couldn't reach you by phone from Los Angeles, so I came out to the beach."

"My line is down. The storm."

"I'm looking for your partner, Max Weber. Do you know where he is?"

"No, I was trying to reach him myself when the line went down. His father, Abraham Weber, died suddenly of a heart attack this evening in Santa Barbara."

"I know," Dawes said. "When I called Mr. Weber's number, trying to find Max, a Santa Barbara policeman answered the phone and told me all about it. They were trying to locate Max, too, he said. They had just talked to you and promised you they'd not release the news until he was found. That was when I tried to call you and discovered your line was down. The studio people in Burbank had told me Max was in Santa Barbara with his father. But he wasn't. Interesting. If he had been, it would have given him an alibi."

"An alibi? For what?" asked Moira.

"His wife, Katie, was murdered this evening."

"But who would want to kill poor Katie?"

"Who but Max? They were on the verge of divorce—as you probably know."

"I didn't."

"The Santa Cristina police called us a little while ago and asked us to bring Max in for questioning. Under California community property law, Katie would get half of everything if there were a divorce. That seems to be very inconvenient for Max just now—as I understand it, he wants to start his own recording company and needs all his capital. Don't tell me you didn't know about that?"

"Of course I knew. That's business. We're partners."

"Katie Weber was in the Santa Cristina house this evening, sitting beside a picture window. According to medical evidence it was about eight thirty when someone fired a shot through the window and killed her instantly. No one heard the shot. Her body was found by her housekeeper, who had left the house at eight, when Katie was still alive, and returned at nine to find her dead. Where was Max at eight thirty?"

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"I don't know, but he would never kill Katie."

Dawes looked at her skeptically. "Tough luck for a murderer to have his only alibi-witness die a natural death while he's committing murder and so blow his carefully planned alibi sky-high."

"How dare you assume that Max and his father would plan a cold-blooded murder together?"

"Before Abraham Weber retired, he was a lawyer for the racketeers. He never committed a crime himself, but he was not exactly punctilious about the letter of the law. And he loved his son. The heart attack suggests that the old man knew what was going on tonight and the excitement was too much for him. If I'm right—if Max did plan to use his father as an alibi-witness—the Lord hath delivered him into our hands."

"What do you mean?"

"You asked the Santa Barbara Police not to release the news of Weber's death until Max was found, so Max cannot possibly know his father is dead. When we pick him up, he'll undoubtedly claim he was in Santa Barbara with his father at eight thirty, the time of the murder, never suspecting that his father was already dead at eight thirty. That will prove that Max was not at his father's house at all tonight. We'll hardly have to question him. We can just sit back and let him talk himself into the gas chamber."

"That's horrible!" cried Moira. "You're setting a trap for him!"

Again there was the sound of a car on the road above the beach. Moira was already at the door. Dawes drew her back, almost roughly.

"That may be Max Weber now. I left word with the highway police to bring him here if they picked him up within an hour of the time I left Burbank. Miss Shiel, if you try to warn him in any way, I'll have you charged as an accessory after the fact. You must not speak to him at all—not a single word. Understand?"

"Yes." She moved like a sleepwalker to the piano bench and sat down. Basil offered her a cigarette. She took it with trembling fingers. It was Dawes who opened the door when the knock came.

The first man to enter was slender, frail, shy. Basil had an impression of intelligence and sensitivity but without strength—always a dangerous constellation. He was followed by a uniformed highway policeman, who spoke to Dawes.

"We picked him up on the grass verge beside the freeway, Lieutenant. He was just outside Burbank, headed south. He said he was on his way home to Santa Cristina."

Basil knew what the Lieutenant was thinking: Max could have driven to Santa Cristina instead of Santa Barbara when he left the Burbank studio, shot his wife, and then returned to Burbank, so he would re-enter Santa Cristina from the north, as if he had driven south from

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Santa Barbara. He'd find some witness on the road between Burbank and Santa Cristina to confirm his driving south at that hour—possibly a filling station man, whom he'd talk to when he stopped for gas.

"Moira!" Max ignored the others. "Have you heard the radio? Katie is dead—murdered—"

He started toward Moira, but Dawes put a hand on his arm.

"You are Max Weber?"

"Yes, but—"

"I'm Lieutenant Dawes, Los Angeles Police, and I must talk to you before anyone else does. Where have you been?"

Moira crushed her cigarette in an ashtray on top of the piano. Her restless fingers strayed across the keyboard.

"Miss Shiel, I know you're nervous, but this is no time for playing the piano. Mr. Weber, where have you been?"

"Santa Barbara. I had intended to dine with my father but—"

"But you didn't? Why not?"

"My poor father." Max dropped into a chair and covered his face with his hands. "Dad died all alone. He must have died just before I got there at eight thirty. He was still warm."

"You called his doctor?"

"No. I should have, shouldn't I? But I didn't. It was such a shock, I went kind of crazy. I drove around for a while, trying to realize what it would be like to live in a world without Dad. At last, I headed for home."

"Still without notifying a doctor?"

"I was going to do that as soon as I got home. It didn't seem to matter, really. Dad was gone. The—the thing lying there had nothing to do with him now . . . I was on the freeway, just south of Burbank, when I heard about Katie on the radio. It was just too much, coming on top of Dad's death. I couldn't drive. I pulled off onto the grass and a few minutes later the cops picked me up and brought me here."

"I guess that lets you out." Dawes couldn't hide his disappointment. "I must apologize for—"

"Apologize?" Basil's voice was sharp. "Lieutenant, are you assuming Max Weber was in Santa Barbara tonight solely because he knows his father is dead?"

"Yes. No one knew about Mr. Weber's death except the neighbor who called the police and the police themselves and Miss Shiel and you. It wasn't on the air, because Miss Shiel made the police promise they wouldn't release the news until Max was found. She couldn't have telephoned Max about his father's death, because her line went down right after the Santa Barbara police called her and told her the news. I know, because it was then I tried to reach her myself. Obviously, she had no opportunity to tell Max that his father was dead before I arrived."

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"True, but Miss Shiel did have an opportunity to tell Max Weber that his father was dead after you arrived."

"What do you mean? She didn't say a single word to him!"

"Words are not the only means of communication."

"You're thinking of some sort of code?"

"I suppose it could be called a code." Basil stepped over to the piano. Slowly he played seven notes. "Do you recognize those notes?"

Dawes looked blank, but the young highway policeman gazed at Basil with awe. "Well, I'll be damned! Key of C natural. It would have to be. You must have perfect pitch, too."

"No, I was watching her hands, as you were watching mine just now."

"What are you two talking about?" demanded Dawes.

"These are the seven notes Miss Shiel struck on the piano: A B E D E A D. *Abe dead.*"

"I hate you!" Moira screamed at Basil. "What business is it of yours? Why didn't you leave it alone?"

"It's all right, Moira," said Max gently. "I might as well give myself up—I haven't a chance without Dad to alibi me. The police will dig and dig until they trace the gun back to me."

"Then . . . you did do it?" Moira's voice was now a whisper.

"Yes, I killed Katie. For you as much as for the money. Moira, I love you so much . . ."

"Why the key of C natural?" Dawes asked Basil, later that evening.

"The enharmonic factor. On the keyboard, B sharp is also C natural, C flat is also B natural, E sharp is also F natural and F flat is also E natural. You can't tell which note of these pairs is indicated unless the notes are written and the key indicated. C natural is the one exception—the one key that has no sharps or flats.

"Max Weber was quick to realize that if Moira's playing was a message in code, it would have to be in the key of C natural—otherwise, he would have no way of identifying the notes—that is, the letters. Because he had perfect pitch, not just relative pitch, he was able to do what few people can do—identify a single note, or a small group of notes, played alone.

"Moira took advantage of Max's gift on the spur of the moment. She was quick, but he was even quicker. They were quite a team, justly famous for picking up each other's cues at an instant's notice . . . I hope you're not going to charge her as accessory?"

"I should," said Dawes slowly. "But I won't. Max's punishment will be punishment enough for her . . . But I'm glad you were here, Dr. Willing—she fooled me completely."

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a new story by

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: FREDRIC BROWN

TITLE: *Why, Benny, Why?*

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: Santa Monica, California

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *She was a pretty freshman at City College, and she quarreled with her boy friend after a date at the movies—it all began just as simply as that . . .*

THE WEATHER WAS DAMP AND cool and foggy, but she was dressed for it. Over a knitted skirt and sweater she wore a man's trench coat. A boy's, rather—it belonged to her fourteen-year-old brother from whom she had borrowed it to go to the movies that evening.

She didn't ordinarily wear a babushka, thinking they made girls look like immigrant women; but she wore one tonight to protect her blonde hair from the damp fog that threatened at any moment to become a drizzle.

On her feet she wore brown oxfords with cuban heels and knitted Scotch plaid half-hose that came to just below her knees. You couldn't tell that, of course, or what else she wore under the trench coat, since the coat hung down to the middle of her calves, an inch or so longer than her skirt.

She was nineteen years old and a freshman at Santa Monica City College. She was quite pretty, almost beautiful. She was alone—and very frightened.

It was half-past eleven on an October night. She had gone to the movies with her boy friend to whom she was more or less, but unofficially, engaged. And over hot dogs and coffee after the movies they had quarreled, suddenly and violently—but not really seriously; she knew she'd forgive him tomorrow, or at

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least in a few days. But for tonight, he had to be taught a lesson, and taught it firmly.

So she had walked out on him.

She was half a block away when he caught up with her, walking in the direction of her home, but farther away from the place where he'd parked his car earlier that night. And he'd given up only when he too became angry—after she'd threatened to call a policeman if he didn't let her alone.

So he let her alone—and now she was really frightened.

The movies they'd seen had been a double-feature horror show. One of the pictures had been about a Jack the Ripper type of criminal who murdered girls in the streets late at night.

It wasn't much of a walk—that is, if she went the short way, the way they couldn't have gone in the car because it was across the narrow strip of park between Ocean Avenue and the palisades, and then down the steep flight of stairs that led down the cliffs to the Palisades Beach Road. She lived with her parents in a house two blocks from the foot of that flight of steps, between the road and the ocean.

There was nothing for her to fear just yet—not on brightly lit Santa Monica Boulevard. But she dreaded that last stretch—across the strip of park, down those narrow steps. If, going down, she met a Jack the Ripper coming *up*, she'd be trapped. The stairs were lighted, but what good would that do her?

She reached the corner of Second Street, and seeing the open drug store there, she hesitated. It was her last chance to avoid walking the last frightening part of the distance. She hadn't brought "mad money" to take a cab, but she did have a little change, a dime to phone for a cab to pick her up here. She couldn't phone home for help because her father had just come home from the hospital and was convalescing from an appendectomy, and not yet permitted to drive the car, and her mother never could drive.

But either one could give her money to pay off a taxi—except that both were probably asleep by now, and her mother would be upset, asleep or not, and she'd have to explain what she and Jim had quarreled about and then her mother would probably make more of the matter than it really deserved and try to talk her out of ever seeing Jim again—and the quarrel wasn't all that serious. It was just that she'd had to teach Jim a lesson—he just had to understand that she had feelings too.

She was being silly about it—she knew that. Nothing was going to happen to her. Resolutely she walked the last block of the boulevard, crossed Ocean Avenue and the strip of park. It was brightly lit, and so were the steps. There was really nothing to fear.

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She started down the steep flight. A dozen steps down, she saw a man coming up toward her from the bottom of the steps. She paused, undecided, trembling a little. If she kept going down, she'd meet him right in the *middle*. No, she'd wait here, near enough the top to be able to retreat if he looked . . . well, dangerous.

As an excuse for stopping and standing there, she opened her handbag and pretended to fumble in it for her cigarettes; finally she took one out, put it between her lips and, started to kill more time by searching for matches.

He was only half a dozen steps below her when the match flared and she looked squarely at him over its flame, pretending to have seen him coming up for the first time.

He was big, *big*—and oh, God, he had a stupid, round moron's face, with vacant little piglike eyes and . . . Suddenly he grinned or leered at her, showing big discolored ugly teeth, one of them missing; he took another step and . . .

She whirled and fled back up the steps. Heavy footsteps pounded after hers. He was gaining—he was amazingly fast for so huge a man. But it wasn't amazement she felt—it was fear, stark fear.

As she reached the top and started across the strip of park, she also started screaming at the top of her voice—a scream of pure terror. He caught her halfway between the top step and the sidewalk. His monstrous hands closed around her throat and the two of them fell heavily to the grass.

Her screaming was shut off, but there was another scream now, the scream of a police car siren. The men in it had heard her and had cut in their siren sharply as they swung the car in to the curb.

She saw the red flasher on top of the car as it came to a stop. But it was the last thing she ever saw. They were too late to save her—too late by just a second or two . . .

In the Interrogation Room of the Santa Monica Police Station three cops were questioning a chastened hulking moron. He sat on a straight chair with a uniformed man on either side of him. The plain-clothes Lieutenant paced angrily in front of him, and the big man's head moved back and forth as he followed the Lieutenant's pacing.

The Lieutenant pounded a fist angrily into his own hand.

"*Damn* it, Benny, *why?* Just tell me *why*."

The detective stopped pacing, but the head of the moron named Benny kept moving back and forth as it had before—but now as a slow, bewildered denial. Benny wasn't refusing to answer; he didn't know how to answer the Lieutenant who had once been his friend and was now so upset and angry.

"Benny, *think*. Quit worrying—I was just trying to scare you when I said you'd get the gas chamber.

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At least, I don't think they'll do that—but it's not my decision. But you *will* have to be put away for the rest of your life.

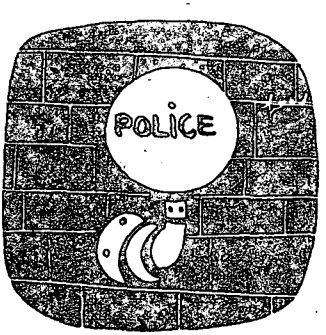
"And damn it, Benny, I want to know why you killed her. We've always known you're not—well, bright—and for that reason we've kept an eye on you. But we've always hoped we'd never have to pull you in. Till tonight, Benny. Till tonight you've stayed out of trouble. You've never stolen even a stick of gum and I'd have sworn you wouldn't hurt a fly. We all got our shoes shined at your stand and we all liked you. So why did you go off the beam tonight? Did you know the girl? Had you ever seen her before?"

Benny's head kept up the negative motion, back and forth, back and forth.

"Why, Benny? Why did you kill her? *Why? Why?*"

The movement of Benny's head slowed, and then he looked down at the floor. He was thinking now, thinking hard, trying to remember.

Finally he found words. He said, "She . . ." And then tried again and found the answer. "She ran."



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a contemporary classic of suspense—
dangerous intrigue in a Continental circus—
a SHORT NOVEL — *complete!*

"For three years, ever since the Communists had taken power, Jan Cernik had lived with the plan. It had grown in his mind, as a tree grows from a seed, nurtured day by day by the persecution of his friends, by police interrogations and searches . . . until now it completely enveloped him.

"He had lived with the plan, and he had lived for the plan. He had conceived it as a magnificent gesture: to take an entire circus through the Iron Curtain would be an act of superb showmanship. It would be a statement of protest and revolt that would be understood and appreciated all over the world.

"But the plan had become far more than even a magnificent gesture: it had become an obsession, his dominating aim in life. His future—the future of his family and friends—their very lives—depended on it . . ."

"Man on the Tightrope" was faithfully transformed into a major motion picture, directed by Elia Kazan from a screenplay by Robert E. Sherwood, and starring Fredric March as Jan Cernik, the circus owner. This excellent short novel of escape from behind the Iron Curtain has been described by critics as "exciting," "breathless," "exhilarating," "gripping," and a "tour de force."

MAN ON THE TIGHTROPE

by NEIL PATERSON

ON THE FIFTEENTH OF AUGUST, at about ten A.M., a big black Renault tourer with a Prague registration number appeared in the sharp angle of the hills, one of which belongs to Czechoslovakia and the other to Austria. The car slid down the cleavage between the hills and came to a halt in the cobbled village square, close by the clock.

One of the two sharp-faced men who occupied the back seat stepped out, and speaking authoritatively although in Slovak, demanded to be directed to the circus. The first two people to whom he spoke appeared not to understand, but the third, lacking the wit to comprehend that this sharp-faced man was an agent of the security police, po-

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litely raised his hat and gave precise directions.

The Circus Cernik was deployed half a kilometer to the east of the village on a flat field of about three acres—a green peninsula, captured by a shapely loop of the river, sharply isolated from its neighbors and dramatized by its boundaries of running water. The Big Top had just been erected: tent men were testing and tightening the guys.

Caravans, trailers, trucks, buses, all in crimson and gold, stood in the lee of the tent by a line of sycamore trees. Ponies grazed under the shelter of their leaves. Men in shirt sleeves worked at the shackles of the trailers, unloaded the trucks, shouldered planks and poles, spread canvas on the grass. Women, busy with clothes and buckets, moved in methodical haste to and from the open doors of the living-vehicles. Village children, officious and shrill, fussed around men, women, horses, caravan, and tent, encircled an elephant, importantly helped lift down seat brackets and fork hay for the fodder heap.

And all this activity was accompanied by the voice of the circus, the daily cacophony compounded of men's shouts and unfamiliar animal noises and the clang of steel mallets and music from half a dozen radios and the occasional revving of engines, and, permeating all the workaday sounds, the high-flying cries of the children.

The Renault tourer nosed across the grass to the encampment. The chauffeur, dressed like the others in dark city-cut civilian clothes, stopped the car and switched off the ignition, and the two hard-faced men got out and walked with unhurried, decisive steps.

Cernik himself opened the door of his caravan to them. He was a man of less than medium height, of a deceptively slight build, with a thin brown face in which the chin was prominent, with shrewd brown eyes and brown wavy hair. He wore a ragged khaki shirt and gray corduroy trousers supported by suspenders of string. He did not look like the owner of a circus. He did not look like the owner of anything.

"You Cernik, proprietor this circus?"

The little man nodded, eyes alert. A wallet appeared in the hands of one of the policemen. There was a flash of papers—credentials, the official photograph, the government stamp.

"Wanted in Brno. Chief of Police."

"Who is it, Cernik?" a woman's voice called from the interior of the caravan.

"Police."

"Crucifix," the woman said. "What do they want now? I thought we'd been through everything with the police."

"These are security police," Cernik said. He watched them intently, noting the inevitable interest in their eyes as his young wife came to

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the door and leaned her magnificent body against the lintel.

"They want me to go to Brno, Mama," Cernik said. "The Chief of Police wants to see me."

"You can't go to Brno," the blonde girl said, "you'd miss the matinée. And besides," she said to the men, "he's been up all night. We just got in. Where'd we come from, Cernik?"

"Vodperk."

"That's right, we just got in from Vodperk. He's been up all night. He has to get his sleep sometime, hasn't he?"

"He can sleep in the car."

"Now listen, you—"

"Save your breath, Mama," Cernik said. "You heard what they said. You know I've got to go."

"You!" Mama said. "All of you." Her breasts came up, and she flicked her head, swishing her tawny hair. "You make me sick, all of you. You, Cernik—"

"Now Mama—"

"Don't Mama me!" The others were forgotten. Her eyes blazed at Cernik, the vulnerable one, the habitual target. "You little squirt, you mild milk-and-water yessing little squirt of a man. Why don't you ever stand up for yourself? My God, call yourself a man—"

"That's enough, Mama."

"I seen better men in a flea pit. So they want you in Brno! If you were half of half a man—"

"That's enough, Mama," Cernik said sharply. "Go and make coffee. I'll need coffee. Go and make it."

She was immediately confused. She pushed out her breasts still farther in what was now only a caricature of temper, and then, with a look at her husband which was intended to convey that this was entirely her own idea, she turned sharply and flounced out of sight into the caravan.

The men stood looking at each other.

"She's a hot one all right," the younger policeman said admiringly. "Tell me, brother, is she always like that?"

"She's tired," Cernik said.

He drew his hand over the stubble of his chin. He was tired too—tired and momentarily dispirited. His mind was unwary, it was with Mama, and not with the police. He knew that she had come to the door to defend him, and then she had lost the place in her argument and, as a matter of course, had attacked him. It had all happened often before, and it would happen often again.

Cernik felt no bitterness, only a great tiredness of mind and of body.

"She was up all night," he said. "We had a breakdown in the Forest. Rear axle. Took us three hours to get on the road again." And then he became aware of the policemen as policemen. "I'll need to shave," he said, "clean up." He waited for their comment, but they said nothing, so he set the door in motion. "I won't be long," he said.

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Inside the caravan Mama lay in an uncomfortable pose on the bed, face down, ignoring him so consciously that he almost smiled. The kettle was on for his shaving water, and there was milk in the coffee pan. He took off his shirt and undershirt, flexed his shoulders.

He was a bigger man without his clothes. He had a deep chest, and the strong sloping shoulders that go with it. There was no fat anywhere on his body. One of his arms—the left—was noticeably shorter than the other. Both biceps were flat and corded, the blood vessels prominent, and the result was that the arms looked older than the body to which they belonged.

Cernik washed to the waist, then shaved, using an old-fashioned razor, his movements precise and economical. He put on a clean undershirt, ladled coffee into the pan, and turned the boiling milk over it. He poured two large cups.

"Coffee, Mama."

She paid no attention. He drank his coffee, watching her, frowning, his mind divided between her and the policemen: twin anxieties.

"Drink your coffee, Mama," he said at last. "It's getting cold."

She still ignored him. He shrugged and turned to the wardrobe. He dressed quickly in his formal clothes—a cream shirt, a navy suit, a checked silk muffler folded over at the throat, and, finally, a greatcoat down to his ankles and an American-type hat, tilted far back and worn on his hair rather than his head.

"I'll be back in time for the evening show, Mama," he said. "They'll manage the matinée all right. Jaro'll take over the clowning routine on the rope, and Fedor and Fedora can double up and Conradin can spin out the shooting stuff." He felt her listening. "I know you're tired," he said placatingly. "Ma Bratislav'll help you with the tickets, and Cara will help too. Where is Cara?"

Caralita was his daughter by his first wife. She was seventeen years old, the apple of his eye.

"Mama. Where's Cara?"

"She went to the village," Mama said without moving.

"What for?"

"Shopping."

"Alone?"

"How would I know," Mama said. "Cernik," she said, still face down, "I'm sick of it. Police, police, police! Every time you open the door it's the police. What do they think we are, anyway? If you weren't such a mouse of a man you wouldn't stand for it. It's that old French bitch to blame. If you would only sack her—"

"Now Mama, you know I couldn't do that."

"I don't know anything. All I know is that you make me sicker and sicker and sicker."

"You're tired, Mama. Why don't you sleep till dinner time? You could have your dinner with the Frascatellis."

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"Sleep!" she said into the pillow. "He says, sleep! And all I have to do!"

"Well," he said, beaten, "I have to be going. I'll be back as soon as they let me. So long, Mama."

She did not reply, and he made a tired little gesture and turned away, but as he reached the door she said, "Cernik," and he saw that she had turned on her back and was regarding him with a warm and brilliant smile. "Take care of yourself," she said softly.

Cernik went out, closing the door carefully behind him. The police agents were standing as he had left them, one on each side of the door of the caravan, and as he went down the steps to join them he saw that the people of the circus had formed an encircling ring. Conradin, sitting on the steps of the caravan opposite cleaning a .30 caliber rifle, arched his eyebrows in mute inquiry, and Cernik's lips quirked in a deprecating smile.

There were people gathered at the doors of the surrounding caravans—Victor Bratislav, ringmaster, and Kalina, wardrobe mistress; Rudolph the lion tamer; Jaromir the clown, and his wife, Cernik's sister Vina; Mendina the juggler; Kubelik the strongman, who had charge of the apes; Madame la Comtesse, equestrienne; Señor and Señora Frascatelli, equilibrists; Fedor and Fedora, acrobats; Kaka the dwarf; Zamek, gaffer of the tent men.

Cernik saw that they were all there, all except—and he felt the usual spurt of irritation—all except Foster, the American; and although they all appeared to be occupied with tasks of one kind or another, Cernik knew that they had gathered deliberately, and that they were waiting for him to speak.

"Victor," he said to Bratislav, "you will have to manage the matinée without me. Jaro will fill in for me, and the rest can overlap their times. Fix it anyhow you like. How's your sick cat, Rudolph? Travel all right?"

"Still sick," Rudolph said in his deep guttural voice. "Sick in the belly. It is a dysentery, I think."

Bratislav said, "You will be back for the evening, Cernik?"

"Undoubtedly. I am going only to Brno."

Jaromir the clown, Cernik's brother-in-law and closest friend, said quietly, "You are going of your own free will, Cernik?"

"But of course."

He got into the car, tilted his hat forward, leaned back against the cool leather upholstery, and closed his eyes. The policemen climbed in at each side of him, and the car moved off.

"How long to Brno?" he asked.

"Two hours."

He looked at his watch. 11:35. Two hours. 1:35. An hour's waiting at the police station and an hour's interrogation. 3:35. Two hours back to the circus. 5:35. Say 6:00. If all went well he would make the eve-

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ning performance comfortably. *If all went well.*

As they rounded the bend into the main village street, the driver said something sharply and jammed on his brakes. A flock of sheep, wedged into the street, advanced on the car, isolated it, slowly jostled past.

"Wait!" Cernik said. "My daughter." He leaned forward, opened the near door, and called, "Cara!"

She didn't hear him. She was standing in the doorway of the provision store talking to Foster, the American. She was looking up into his face, laughing, teasing him, characteristically gay; and the foreigner, equally characteristically, was smiling back at her, with that puzzled, rueful look that emphasized his foreignness.

Cernik felt a sharp stab of anxiety. Although he disliked raising his voice he called her name loudly. "Cara!"

She saw him and immediately absorbed the significance of car and men. Was it his imagination, or was there for one unguarded moment a flicker of guilt in her eyes? He cut off the thought as she darted toward the car: he was too ready to harbor such thoughts.

"Police, Papa?" Cara said. It was not really a question. She wrinkled her nose in disgust. "Where are they taking you this time?"

"Brno."

"What for?"

"Oh, just some routine thing."

"It'll be all right then, won't it, Papa?"

"Yes, Cara, it'll be all right."

Out of the corner of his eye he was aware of Foster watching them, watching and waiting. He can afford to wait, Cernik thought, and felt a heavy and hopeless irritation.

"You'll miss the matinée, Papa."

"Yes, but I'll be back for the evening show."

"Will you have time to do any shopping?"

"I don't know."

"If you have time, Papa, could you get me some blue silk? Royal blue. Three meters. And I know that Ma Bratislav wants lace for curtains."

"I doubt if I shall have time," Cernik said. He was still thinking of Foster. "But I shall try. Are you going straight home now, Cara?"

"We are going to have a *café crême* first."

The "we" stung him. "Go straight home," he said. "Mama's tired. You ought to be at home helping her." He had spoken with unnecessary sharpness. He tried to make amends. "I'm worried about Mama," he said. "She's tired, overwrought." He smiled deliberately. "Go home and help her, Cara. See to the tickets."

"Oh, Papa, I'll go home right away, I'll run. I'll look after Mama —everything—for you." She thrust her thin body impulsively into the interior of the car, kissed him on

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the lips. "And you'll be home soon, Papa?"

"Soon," he said.

The moment she straightened up, one of the policemen slammed the door. The car moved off. Cernik stared straight ahead until they had left the village far behind, and then he glanced at first one and then the other of the police agents. They were both sitting upright, and on both faces was the curious withdrawn expression that he had noted before on the faces of security policemen.

Cernik cleared his throat. "What does the Chief want me for?"

"You'll find out."

"I suppose that means you don't know."

"He thinks we don't know," said the man who had spoken first, and the other man smiled meaningly.

Cernik was not impressed. He knew that this was not an arrest, for if these men had been sent to arrest him they would never have dared to let him dress behind a closed door.

"You boys come from Prague?" he asked.

"Could be."

"Do a lot of this sort of thing—traveling around the country?"

"Fair bit."

Cernik sighed and dived into the pocket of his enormous greatcoat. He offered his cigarette case. "Smoke?"

The two policemen shook their heads.

Cernik sighed again, lit a cigarette, and contemplated the roof lining. He liked to talk at any time, and he would particularly have liked to talk just now. He would have liked to talk the tightness out of his stomach: he craved the comfort of words.

He blew a smoke ring, and sent another through it, and another through that. No dice. The policemen weren't interested in parlor tricks. There was nothing for it but to think. Not that thinking ever helped. "It worries me to see you thinking so much," Jaro had said. "You have a plan. Your plan is to take the entire circus out of the country into free Austria. It is an absurd plan, but it is also a sound plan. It is already sound in every detail, so stop thinking about it. Thinking only gives you a pain in the guts. You show me a good thoughtful clown, and I will show you a disease of the duodenum."

And Jaro was quite right, except that Jaro himself was a good thoughtful clown and a fat and happy man, and as far as anybody knew had no disease of the duodenum or any other part of his anatomy. If Cernik had to think, he would like to think happy thoughts about Jaro, but it was not a matter of choice; his thoughts were already decided for him: they were of Cara and Mama and the interview with the Chief of Police—and they were all unhappy thoughts.

One way or another it had been

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a bad season for Mama, and he wished it was over and he could get her settled in winter quarters, away from all the tension of tenting life, away—let him face it bluntly—away from Rudolph and his accursed cats.

He didn't blame Mama. He was always saying to himself that he didn't blame Mama. He said it so often that he sometimes wondered if it was quite true. But he *didn't* blame Mama. Mama was as she was, and blame was neither here nor there and never could be. How could Mama absorb the wisdom of the circus? She was a city girl, and her mind moved in city ways, and as for her glands, they were the work of God.

Cernik closed his eyes and looked at the picture of Mama as he had last seen her, lying on her back on the divan, hair splashed over the pillow, eyes big and female, a knee pushed up through the split of her kimono. He didn't blame Mama, but he did sometimes wish that she wasn't quite so crude. She lay in his recollection just like the women in the pictures in the magazines that Kaka the dwarf was always reading. He felt the familiar throb of a little lascivious pulse above his left eye. Mama knew what she was doing. Crude maybe, but effective—*cruci*, how effective!

And immediately he thought of Rudolph, and his stomach ached with anxiety.

He reminded himself that Rudolph was a man of honor, and Cernik took some consolation from the thought. It was, he reflected wryly, because Rudolph was a man of honor that he disliked him more—far more—than he had disliked any of the others. He disliked Rudolph exceedingly for his sense of honor, yet took comfort in it. What a paradoxical creature a human being was, even an entirely reasonable human being like himself! What a tinker's bag of inconsistencies. But there was no refuge in these platitudes. Cernik put his hands on his stomach, feeling his jealousy like a physical thing.

Consider it logically, he thought. It's early morning, Mama is tired, and maybe Jaro will keep an eye on her until Cara gets home; and when Cara gets back she'll look after Mama—it's astonishing the way they get on together, a miracle, I thank God for it: Cara will look after Mama all right—she always does.

See, he lied to himself, you look at a worry and it dissolves.

There was Cara, too, to think about—Cara and this foreigner Foster. He had to recognize that at seventeen Cara was grown up. He had been recognizing it for some months past in words, but it was not yet a fact in his thoughts. He could accept the flat statement that his daughter was a woman, but that was as far as he would go. He would not contemplate the implications.

He wished irritably that he had

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never taken Foster on, and could not understand why he had. Foster had attached himself to the circus in Kraliky—or was it Krnov?—anyway it was during the early summer in Northern Moravia. He had simply adopted the circus as his home. He lived and traveled with the horses. He was inoffensive and unobtrusive, and no one, least of all Cernik, paid attention to him.

Then it began to be noticed that Foster had a way with horses. He had natural hands. The Liberties looked better than ever before; the ponies' coats had an unfamiliar sheen. At Studenka, Zizka the rosin-back became sick of the palsy, and the vet whom Cernik summoned from Vitkovice found her belly full of horsebane and gave her forty-eight hours to live. Foster treated her, cured her. It was then that Cernik became aware of him, and he was amused to learn that the boy had been with the circus for some weeks.

"It appears to be unnecessary to put him on the payroll," he had said. But he had taken him on till the end of the summer as "horseman to help with tents." It had been a grave mistake. Admittedly Foster was good with horses, but what did the horses matter when held in the balance against his daughter's future? . . .

And then there was the big worry of the plan, and, more immediately, this interview with the Chief of Police. What could the Chief want to see him about? "It's that old French bitch," Mama had said. Well, he hoped so, he hoped it was only that. His mind ranged uneasily over the possibilities, returned to Mama, to Cara, back to the Chief of Police.

Oh, well, there was no sense in worrying, no point even in thinking. He had been over all this a hundred times, and it had never got him anywhere.

What would be would be. Jaro was right. Thinking was bad for a man. He stubbed his cigarette, leaned back between the policemen, and burrowed almost out of sight into his greatcoat.

In a few minutes he was asleep.

Cernik was awake before the car stopped, but he allowed the policemen to think they had wakened him. He got out, his coat trailing, and stumped between his escorts up the steps, into the police station.

It was a modern station, built in the booming years between the wars. The outer office was a large airy room. The walls were painted a dainty pink and decorated with angular blueprint-like paintings of the Town Hall and the University and the Spelberk and the Cathedral of St. Peter and Paul.

There were flowers everywhere—on the window seats, on filing cabinets, and on the desk. The desk ran the whole length of the room, and behind the desk, at regular intervals, sat five uniformed policemen;

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and behind them, in the desked-off area of the room, several more policemen sat at little tables, on each of which was a vase of flowers.

His escorts marched Cernik up to the middle-aged policeman who sat in the central position at the long desk.

"This is Cernik," one of them said.

"Cernik. So?" said the man behind the desk, and he laid down his pen and glanced at a convenient sheet of paper. "Jan Cernik?"

"That's me," Cernik said.

The man behind the desk picked up the telephone at his elbow. "My compliments, Chief," he said. "Cernik." He listened, replaced the receiver. "Chief'll see him in half an hour," he announced.

"In that case," Cernik said, "I think I shall do some shopping."

"I wouldn't," the man at the desk said.

"Why not? Am I under arrest?"

"I wouldn't say exactly that you are under arrest, Circus Proprietor Cernik. Not exactly. I merely offer you my official advice. In my opinion it would not be wise for you to leave."

Cernik looked from face to face. He felt anger rise in him and cut it off with an effort of will. They have faces like machines, he thought. They have turned their machine-like faces on me to intimidate me. He shoved his hands deep into the pockets of his coat and nipped the material of the linings between thumbs and forefingers. He concentrated all his strength in his fingers.

"Nice place you have here," he said mildly. He sauntered to the nearest window and looked out. He could see only a graveyard with a high wall, and, above the wall, tenement roofs and a distant factory chimney. "Nice view."

No one answered him. He sat down on a bench by the wall and pulled out his cigarette case.

"It is forbidden to smoke," the man at the desk said.

Cernik began to sweat. He put his cigarettes back in his pocket, tilted his hat forward so that his face was concealed, crossed his feet, and leaned back against the wall.

"I regret about the smoking," the man at the desk said. "But you will understand it is bad for the flowers."

Cernik did not reply. He breathed deeply and regularly. He hoped he was presenting a convincing picture of a man falling asleep. But this time he was very wide-awake . . .

Later—much later—he was taken to the office of the Chief of Police.

The Chief was a small man, smaller and slighter than Cernik, with a large close-shaven head and enormous dark luminous eyes. He wore a navy tunic with epaulettes, and Cernik felt that if it had not been for the epaulettes his head would have been as wide as his shoulders. He sat at a massive leather-covered desk built on pedestals of drawers. On the wall behind him were two huge maps, of Brno and

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of Moravia. There were no flowers in the room.

The two security policemen brought Cernik up to the desk, and the Chief acknowledged them with a little dip of his head and at the same time crossed and uncrossed his hands in a colorful gesture of dismissal.

"Your papers, if you please."

Cernik handed them over.

"Now that we are alone," the Chief of Police said, "you may sit down. These security chaps like things done in a very formal way. Sit down and make yourself comfortable, Circus Proprietor Cernik. Have a cigar."

"I shall smoke a cigarette—if I may."

"By all means. Well, now, our business." He opened a folder and began to recite briskly. "You are Jan Cernik, forty-three years of age, proprietor of the Circus Cernik. Born eighth March, 1908, in the village of Gran in the province of Silesia, third son of Wilhelm Cernik, cobbler. Is that correct?"

"Correct," Cernik said.

"You have been associated with circus life since 1918 when you ran away from home to join the Cirque Africaine as foil for your paternal uncle, Bernard Cernik, trampoline acrobat. In a fall in the summer of 1920 you sustained an injury to your left arm, and as a result of this injury your left arm is five inches shorter than your right. Be good enough to extend your arms to me . . . Thank you. Subsequently, on your discharge from the hospital, you joined the Circus Varnsdorf as a tent boy. There you took up wire walking, and first appeared in public as a wire walker in Plsen in October, 1923. There, too, you first became acquainted with the woman who calls herself Madame la Comtesse d'Aragon, equestrienne." The Chief's voice had not changed, but Cernik suspected that he had come to the point. "Is that correct?"

"That is all correct, Chief, save that my uncle Bernard was not a trampoline acrobat, he was a Risley artiste. R-i-s-l-e-y." He spelled it.

"It is not of consequence," the Chief said, making the alteration. "But I like to have things correct. In 1931, at the age of twenty-three, you opened the Circus Cernik. Where did you get the money?"

"I had some money saved. But most of it came from the National Bank."

"And—I put it to you—from Madame la Comtesse?"

"She advanced me a small sum."

"Why?"

Cernik shrugged. "From sentiment, perhaps."

"You were her lover?"

Cernik smiled. "When I first met Madame la Comtesse, Chief, she was in her fifties, an elderly woman, and I was a boy in my teens."

"Nevertheless, one hears of such liaisons."

"I was not her lover," Cernik said.

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"Your relationship, then, was rather that of mother and son?"

It was an incongruous idea. "Madame la Comtesse is a woman of some asperity," Cernik said. "I cannot think of her as a mother, Chief, nor can I imagine her entertaining maternal feelings. Our relationship was that of friends."

"So," the Chief said, convinced but puzzled. "Well, to continue. In 1933 you toured not only Southern Bohemia but also the Austrian Tyrol. In September of that year you married . . . I think we can omit all this . . . Daughter born, wife died, married again. Ah, yes, here we are. In 1939 you volunteered and were accepted for active service on the Sudeten frontier, although your disability would have freed you from the necessity of taking up arms. Circus Proprietor Cernik, I am instructed to ask why you volunteered for the Army in 1939."

"It seemed necessary," Cernik said.

"I think it only fair to warn you," the Chief said, speaking very slowly and distinctly, "that importance attaches to this point. What were your motives in 1939 in disbanding your circus and joining the Army?"

"I do not recall that I had any particular motives. The Germans were massing on the border. It seemed necessary to be a soldier. It was a matter of duty."

"Your motives were political?"

Watch it, Cernik said to himself, watch it, here it comes. "I know nothing of politics, Chief. I am a man of the circus."

The Chief sighed. "It is not yet a crime to take an interest in politics. You had strong feelings against the Germans? You are a patriot?"

"I would not claim so much. I regard myself only as a Czech."

"And it was solely for reasons of patriotism that you joined the Army in 1939?"

"I suppose so," Cernik said cautiously. "It seemed necessary at the time."

"Very well," the Chief said, and he made a little mark in the dossier. "That is established. Now with regard to Madame la Comtesse . . . You will be aware, no doubt, that it is because of this woman that you have been brought before me?"

Cernik sighed openly in relief. "I thought it likely," he said, smiling. "This is not the first time I have been examined. I suppose she has been writing letters again?"

"Many letters. She has also been speaking in shops, in trams and buses, to passers-by in the streets. I have here a detailed record of her latest indiscretions. Is she insane?"

"No," Cernik said. "I would not call her insane."

"Then what is the matter with her?"

"She is of the old brigade," Cernik said, choosing his words carefully. "She does not understand the modern processes of government."

There was a moment's silence.

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"Cernik," the Chief said, "I wish to be frank with you. You are plainly a man of character and intelligence, and I think it is in your best interests, and in mine also, that I should be entirely truthful. My instructions are to frighten you. Instead, I shall merely tell you the truth. Madame la Comtesse is described in this paper before me as a dangerous and seditious person. She has plainly become an embarrassment to the regime. You may ask, as I too have asked myself, why it is that the oblique approach should be made. Why should you, the employer, be held responsible? Why is it that the lady herself is not imprisoned or deported?

"It is my personal opinion that the answer is to be found in her history. Madame la Comtesse has been, in her day, a very distinguished woman. She is known all over the world—Paris, Berlin, London, Vienna, Constantinople, New York—she has had triumphs everywhere. And she is an old woman. You will have noticed, Circus Proprietor Cernik, that governments everywhere are sensitive to world opinion, and especially new revolutionary governments.

"Our own masters are no exceptions. They do not wish to incur odium abroad by imprisoning or even deporting this famous old woman, but they are determined to make it impossible for her to remain in Czechoslovakia. And that is why they are putting pressure on you, Cernik; that is why you are sitting here before me today. You have been warned before against this woman, and you have taken no action. Suspicion is now falling on you personally."

"That is impossible," Cernik said. "I am nonpolitical. I take no sides."

"It may be necessary to take sides," the Chief said mildly. "The official view is that you are in effect condoning the seditious behavior of this old aristocrat by retaining her in your circus. By the way, is she truly aristocratic? Is the title genuine?"

"I do not know," Cernik said. "I imagine not. But she has used it for so long that she believes in it herself. As for discharging her, she is an old woman, Chief, and the circus is her home. She must be over seventy."

"Seventy-two," the Chief said. "I understand the argument, and I condone the sentiment, but you carry both to excess. You do not appear to appreciate your own danger. It is against you officially that you volunteered unnecessarily for the Army in 1939: this marks you as a man of initiative, a man who is prepared to act on his principles. Such men, I regret to say, are regarded as dangerous. You are yourself under suspicion, Circus Proprietor Cernik, as a person who is not politically reliable."

"That is a monstrous allegation, Chief."

"Nowadays," the Chief said calm-

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ly, "people are hanged every day on just such monstrous allegations. Allegation is the new form of proof. It must be clear to you from what I have told you that neither you nor anyone else can now help this woman. She is beyond assistance. If you persist in championing her, all you will achieve is your own destruction. You are a sensible man, Circus Proprietor Cernik. Behave sensibly. Get rid of her. Come now, give me an assurance that you will do so immediately."

Cernik said, "I shall consider it carefully, Chief."

"That is not enough," the Chief said. "It is past the time for considering. Hitherto, I have spoken as an individual, as one who does not owe his promotion to the present regime. It is my duty now to speak to you as an official of the government. Today is the fifteenth. I am instructed to inform you that as from today you have precisely one week in which to terminate your association with this woman."

He pressed the bell on his desk. The interview was at an end.

It was half-past six in the evening when Cernik returned to the circus. He had taken a train to Znogmo, and, of necessity, a taxi from Znogmo on, and he had been overcharged. He was tired and irritated and worried.

Mama was not in the caravan. He stood in the doorway, his hat on the back of his head, looking carefully around the interior of his home, searching deliberately for some clue to Mama's whereabouts and to the nature of her day.

He felt a movement behind him and turned sharply. It was only Vina, his sister, Jaro's wife. She was a little wizened woman, not unlike him, with frizzy hair and brown cautious eyes. She had just opened the door of her caravan, opposite, and was about to shake out a mat.

"Seen Mama?" he demanded.

"No," she said. "Cara said she was sleeping. But that was in the afternoon. How did it go in Brno?"

"Not too bad," he said. "Tell Jaro . . ." He hesitated. "Tell Jaro I'll want a meeting tonight. Here, in my place. After the show."

"A meeting?" she said, curious. "A meeting of who?"

His sister knew nothing of the plan. Neither did his wife. Nor his daughter. None of the women knew.

"Just tell Jaro a meeting," he said. "He'll understand. And if you see Mama tell her I'm back, and that I've gone over to Madame's."

He walked around the perimeter of the encampment. His objective was the ornate, old-fashioned trailer-caravan belonging to Madame la Comtesse d'Aragon, but he approached it by a deliberate detour that would take him past the door of Rudolph's caravan.

"I shall not speak to him," he thought.

He threaded a way between caravans and tents and trucks, ducking

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under guy ropes and lines of washing, acknowledging greetings with automatic gestures of head and hands. He told himself that he was thinking only of Madame la Comtesse and of the plan, and that it was entirely natural that his temples should be throbbing and that there should be sweat on the palms of his hands.

He found himself climbing the steps of Rudolph's caravan. If he must speak to Rudolph he would do so with circumspection. He would merely inform him that there was to be a meeting of the planners tonight, and that was all.

There was no reply to his knock, and he was sorely tempted to try the door, but would not. As he stood, irresolute, Rudolph came around the side of the caravan and halted at sight of him.

They stood eyeing each other like a pair of hostile dogs, the little insignificant man engulfed in the greatcoat and the big colorful man in white silk shirt and black breeches. Cernik looked at the florid face and glistening black mustache, and circumspection was forgotten. He said, "Seen Mama?"

Rudolph said, "Not since the afternoon."

Cernik stood waiting.

"She came over in the afternoon."

Cernik still waited.

"I didn't let her in."

Cernik, without taking his eyes off Rudolph, put a cigarette in his mouth, but did not light it.

"She wanted me to fix a lamp, she said."

"I don't want to know what she wanted," Cernik said. "All I wanted to know was, have you seen Mama."

"Well," Rudolph said, "I've seen her."

Cernik slowly lighted his cigarette. He blew out a thin projectile of smoke, stepped down to the ground, and turned away.

"Cernik," Rudolph said softly. "Listen to me. Keep her away from me."

Cernik stopped in his tracks, but did not turn. He said, "Rudolph, when I want advice from you I'll ask for it."

"Don't try me too hard, Cernik. I have only good will toward you."

It was true too. The sentimental German. He was full of good will, and there was nothing about him that irritated Cernik more.

Cernik smiled and said lightly, "You're a good chap, Rudolph, and I depend on you." And he nodded and walked on.

He felt better, much better—free to give his mind exclusively now to Madame, and Madame's folly, and its effect upon the plan. The problems that had weighed so heavily on him only a few seconds before now merely stimulated his imagination. He was no longer the slave of the plan. He was its master.

He lengthened his stride and began to whistle tunelessly between his teeth. He had walked fifty yards before he realized that he had for-

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gotten to tell Rudolph that there was to be a meeting that night.

He knocked on the door of Madame's caravan.

"Who is it?" her precise voice demanded.

"It is I—Cernik. I want to see you."

"I am dressing."

He smiled. She was always dressing. "Nevertheless I want to see you, Madame. It is a matter of importance."

"Nothing is of more importance to me than my toilette."

Cernik waited, mastering his impatience. He knew that she had simply spoken the truth when she had said that nothing was more important than her toilette. It was now her life's work. Her dressing table and her shelves were crammed with jars and bottles of all shapes and sizes—a veritable armory of cosmetics—and her wardrobes were packed with contraptions, ingenious to the point of obscenity.

She spent the greater part of each day working with an artist's concentration on her wigs, her face, her figure; and the result, when seen under the arc lights, was entirely effective. The face was a mask of youth, the figure a triumph of engineering, but audiences saw only a youngish and glamorous woman. Everyone in the circus knew how important Madame's toilette was, and no one, least of all Cernik, would have thought of interrupting it without good reason. Madame, also, must know that.

He knocked again, sharply. "Madame!"

"Cernik," Madame said, "I shall receive you when I have completed my toilette, and not before. I shall send for you."

Anger flared in him. "Very well, be kind enough to listen to me. I have spent the day on your account in the police station in Brno. You have been indiscreet for the last time. There are to be no more warnings. I have been given precisely one week in which to discharge you."

There was silence. He imagined her busy hands arrested in mid-air.

"Did you hear me?"

"I heard you," she said.

He walked away. There was some sort of commotion in the Big Top, but it did not engage his mind: there were always commotions. Madame was impossible, but he should not have lost his temper. She was an old and celebrated woman, and it was his duty to be indulgent to her: no one else was nowadays.

He became aware of his nephew Karel.

The boy was running toward him. "Uncle," he was calling in an unnecessarily loud voice. "Uncle, you're wanted in the Big Top."

"Hullo, Karel," he said easily. He was always easy in an emergency. "What is it? What's the matter?"

"It's Kaka."

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"What's that accursed dwarf been doing now?"

"He's up a king pole and won't come down. He's got a knife. Fedor went up for him, and Kaka slashed at him."

"Hurt him?"

"No." The boy was a true son of Jaro: his eyes danced with humor. "Just his dignity. He had to slide a couple of meters down the pole like a monkey. We've had a lot of fun, but I think my father's getting worried because they're beginning to line up at the box office."

"All right, Karel," Cernik said. "Run on and tell them I'm coming."

But first he had something to do. He had a mental picture of Madame's eyes staring from their mask like stricken beasts in a cage. He had been unnecessarily cruel. He turned back quickly, and knocked again on the door of her caravan.

"Yes?"

"It's Cernik again. We'll have a talk later. All I want to say just now is that somehow I shall find a way out of this difficulty. I have no intention of discharging you."

"Naturally not," Madame said, speaking in her most disdainful aristocratic voice. "Where would this little pot of a circus be without me?"

Cernik turned away toward the Big Top. "The old bitch," he said admiringly. She was utterly impossible. But you had to grant it. She was also magnificent: she wanted no sympathy, and she needed none.

And now for Kaka.

He thrust aside the flap of the Big Top and walked in. There was a crowd around the farther king pole. Mama—yes, there she was—and Foster and Cara, standing together, and Jaro and Ma Bratislav, and Fedor and Fedora, and Kubelik, and a dozen tent men, and a host of children. They were all speaking and shouting, and they were all looking up at the top of the king pole where Kaka the dwarf clung gesticulating and jabbering down at them like an excited monkey.

"What's all this about?" Cernik demanded.

Everybody started to tell him at the same time.

"Shut up," he said. "Jaro?"

"Mustard in the apes' food," Jaro said. "Kubelik chased him into the tent, and he shinned up the pole. Fedor went up after him—"

"He tried to stab me," Fedor said.

"Yes, he did," Fedora said. "See the steel in his hand. The abomination of a pygmy!"

"All right," Cernik said. "All right, I know the rest."

"It's a lie! It's a lie!" Kaka was screaming.

"Let me get my hands on him," Kubelik said. "I shall tear his joints apart. Let me have him inside those hands, Cernik, for thirty seconds, that is all I ask."

"It's a lie!" Kaka screamed. "It's a conspiracy!"

"Cernik," Mama said, her eyes feverish, "you'll have to thrash him.

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You will thrash him, won't you?"

"Hush, Mama," Cernik said. "Hush, everybody." He looked up at Kaka, still gesticulating, still screaming, and made up his mind. "Jaro," he said, "clear the tent. Everybody out."

Mama said, "You'll let me stay, Cernik?"

"Everybody out," Cernik said. He took a cigarette from his pocket and put it in his mouth.

"All I want is thirty seconds with him, Cernik," Kubelik said.

"Come on now," Jaro was shouting. "Outside. All of you. Everybody out."

"Cernik," Mama said, gripping his arm. "Take him to the caravan. Do that for me. Take him to the caravan, Cernik."

He looked at her.

"Please, Cernik, please!"

"All right, Mama, you go and make a sandwich. A mustard sandwich. A hot one. And Mama, I'll want my supper."

"It's in the grill," Mama said. "It's all ready for you." She looked up at Kaka. "The little beast," she said in a relish of disgust, and she squeezed Cernik's arm affectionately. "Oh, this is fun, Cernik!"

The tent was empty now. Kaka jabbered on, protesting his innocence. Cernik paid no attention. He did not even look up. He smoked his cigarette stolidly, apparently unconscious of the little frenzied figure above. The dwarf's protestations became more and more spasmodic, and finally dwindled away altogether. Cernik dropped his cigarette butt and screwed it into the ground with the heel of his shoe.

He said in conversational tones, "Come down, Kaka."

"No," Kaka said. He began to scream again. He hadn't been near the apes. It was Kubelik himself. Kubelik had always hated him. And another thing: he had seen one of the tent men put something in the apes' plate. It was something out of a tube. He couldn't remember the man's name, but he knew him well by sight, and he would point him out to Cernik, he was a bad man, there were a lot of bad men in the circus, Kubelik was a bad man and this tent man was a bad man and there were other bad men, and they were all in a conspiracy against poor Kaka, the poor innocent little dwarf. He wept in a great gust of self-pity.

Cernik waited till the paroxysm had passed. "Come down, Kaka," he said.

"No, they'll kill me."

"In all the years you have been with me," Cernik said, "have I ever let anyone lay a hand on you?"

"Nobody except yourself," Kaka said. "But if I come down you'll thrash me, and last time you thrashed me *you* nearly killed me." He began to cry again.

It was true. He had caught Kaka spying on Mama, and he had been angry with Mama for being careless,

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and he had taken it all out on Kaka and had thrashed him within an inch of his life. He did not like to be reminded of that. He said, "Come down, Kaka, and I shall not thrash you."

"You promise it?"

"I promise it."

"Promise it on the life of your daughter. If you thrash me, may she die in an agony of disease. Swear it, Cernik."

"I swear it," Cernik said.

"Say it in the words. I shall not come down unless you say it in the words."

"All right," Cernik said. "If I thrash you, may my daughter die in an agony of disease. Now drop the knife."

Kaka hesitated, then threw the knife to the ground.

"Now come down."

Kaka slid down the pole, slowly at first, and then, as he neared the ground, in a sudden rush; but Cernik was prepared for this maneuver and grabbed him before he could escape.

"Give me your hand, Kaka."

"What are you going to do with me?"

"I would like to do nothing at all," Cernik said. "But you would not understand that, and neither would Kubelik nor the rest of the people. I am going to give you what you gave the apes."

They left the tent hand in hand. Kaka was silent, but as they approached Cernik's caravan he began to whimper. "There was only a very little mustard in their food," he said.

Mama was waiting for them in a state of great excitement. "I've made the sandwich, Cernik," she said. "But I think it would be much better if you thrashed him. It's the only thing he understands."

Cernik's belt was laid out on the table, and, alongside it, a sandwich. "Thrash him, Cernik," Mama said. She touched the belt.

"There is to be no thrashing, Mama," Cernik said. He nodded at the sandwich. "Take your medicine, Kaka."

Kaka's little eyes darted balefully from one to the other as he picked up the sandwich and eyed them over it, hating them both, vicious as a cornered rat.

"If you spit out as much as a mouthful," Cernik said, blocking off the obvious escape, "I shall take the sandwich and ram it down your throat inch by inch with my fingers." And Kaka knew from old experience that Cernik, having said this thing, would do it.

"If he won't eat it, you'll beat him, won't you, Cernik?" Mama pleaded.

"He'll eat it," Cernik said. He took no satisfaction from a scene of this kind. On the contrary, he greatly disliked it. It was simply his duty to mete out justice, and he wanted to get it over and done with. "Eat it, Kaka," he said curtly.

The dwarf took a tiny nibble at

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a corner of the sandwich, and another, and another. Finally, a bite.

"More," Cernik said.

As if in temper, the dwarf thrust half the sandwich into his mouth. Tears spurted from his eyes, his face became purple, and he fell to his knees, clawing with both hands at his throat, screaming.

"You're murdering me," the dwarf screamed. "Oh mother of God, my neck, my guts! I'll kill you for it, Cernik, kill you, d'ye hear, kill you. Ah, God, mother o' God, the hate, the hot agony!"

Cernik opened the door, and with his foot bundled the squirming body of the dwarf toward it. The scene disgusted him, and the dwarf's hatred aroused disturbing echoes in his memory.

Cernik was Kaka's protector. He had saved Kaka times without number from the vengeance of his victims. Once or twice he had even saved his life. Yet the dwarf's only feeling for him was hatred, a genuine burning hatred. Kaka hated nearly everyone, but he hated Cernik more venomously and more consistently than he hated any other living person. And Cernik knew it, and did not understand it, and worried over it.

Kaka had started to curse Mama now, putting his finger with deadly accuracy on Cernik's Achilles heel. He cursed Mama and Mama's body and what she did with it and whom she did it with. He cursed her and all her female works in one long breath, with detailed and dreadful obscenity.

"Get out!" Cernik said in a cold rage, and he toed the creature through the door.

Kaka shrieked, there was one last violent obscenity, and then the sound of retching. Cernik slammed the door.

"Lock it," Mama said. "Lock it, Cernik."

She was lying on the divan, her eyes on him, glittering, big and black, her nostrils dilating. "You should have thrashed him, Cernik," she whispered, and he saw that last terrible thrashing in her great eyes.

"I shall speak to Kaka later," he said. "He will never say such things again."

He deplored her excitement, and the cruelty that had aroused it, and the purging it now demanded. He hated this urgency of hers, yet exulted in it. He was its willing and practiced accomplice.

"For God's sake, lock the door," she said.

Her lip was up in a sort of snarl. She was ugly when she looked at him like that, challenging him on an animal level, demanding a complementary brutality from him, and, *cruci*, he always had it for her, and to spare. He felt on his face the same ugly expression that he saw on hers.

Without taking his eyes off her he locked the door.

The following morning there was

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an event unprecedented in the history of the circus.

Heinrich Cheb paid a visit.

Cheb was proprietor of a rival circus. The Circus Cheb and the Circus Cernik were approximately the same size, and, since the war, had traveled the same routes. There was bitter enmity between them. Each had bribed the other's advance agents, torn down the other's bills, repeatedly and treacherously queered the other's pitch. Each had a score of genuine grievances against the other, and on the few occasions when the circuses had met there had been open and bloody battle, with heads split open, wagons overturned, and the inevitable sequel of vindictive litigation.

It was Bratislav who brought the news of Cheb's arrival. Bratislav was an old and dignified man, but he ran like a boy among the caravans, calling for Cernik. He found him at last under the Ford truck at work on the back springs, and he was so full of the news that he could not wait till Cernik had crawled out but himself crawled underneath to impart it.

"Who?" Cernik said, pulling with a wrench at a nut.

"Cheb," Bratislav repeated.

"Heinrich Cheb?"

"Himself. Believe it or not, Cernik, asking for you. He's at your caravan."

Together they wriggled out from under the truck.

"Is he alone?" Cernik demanded.

"He has four of his men with him."

Cernik looked at the wrench in his hand. If Cheb were here it could only mean trouble. He said, "Does Jaro know?"

"Everybody knows. I never saw anything go through the circus so quick. And everybody's watching him. He won't start anything, Cernik. He wouldn't dare."

Cernik brushed himself off and set off, Bratislav panting at his side.

"What do you think he wants, Cernik?"

"How would I know?" Cernik said curtly. He saw Cheb a long way off, and the hairs on his neck rose like a terrier's.

Cheb was standing by the door of Cernik's caravan, closely surrounded by his bodyguard. There were four of them, and they were all big men, but Cheb towered above them. He was always a remarkable sight. Today he wore a huge sombrero and a frilled Indian coat, and he was smoking the longest cigar that Cernik had ever seen. He was a showman, whereas Cernik was an artiste, and each despised the other on this account.

When Cheb saw Cernik he took his cigar deliberately from his mouth and spat. Cernik walked right up to Cheb, halting only when his head was under the big man's hat.

"You have a nerve, Cheb," he said.

"I have probably more nerve than any man in the country,"

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Cheb said in his great booming voice, and his eyes twinkled inside their blinkers of fat. "It is generally known."

"What do you want?"

"I came to *parlari*."

Cernik looked around. His people were all there, perplexed, waiting like children for some indication as to how they should behave. Cernik was perplexed too. He fingered the lobe of his ear, looked meaningly at Jaro, and Jaro nodded.

Cheb saw and understood the exchange. He said, "Tell your people not to interfere with my men."

"Your men won't come to any harm as long as they behave themselves," Cernik said. He jerked his thumb at the door of his caravan, and Cheb, after a moment's hesitation, preceded him up the steps.

Mama was standing by the stove, trying to look unconcerned. Cheb swept off his sombrero with a gallant bow. "Madame Cernikova, I believe." But Mama looked only at Cernik, who said, "Outside." Mama went out like a scalded cat.

Cernik closed the door and Cheb seated himself in the only chair and looked around, plainly approving Mama's tinseled furnishings. He said, "Nice place you have here. Surprisingly elegant, if you understand me."

Cernik remained standing. "Come to the point, Cheb."

"Last night," Cheb said, "you had a meeting here, in this room. Those present were"—he produced a scrap of paper from the crown of his hat and read—"yourself, Jaro, Bratislav, Conradin, Kubelik, Fedor, Rudolph. Do I interest you, Cernik?"

"Go on speaking," Cernik said. "I know what you talked about."

Cheb leaned back negligently in the little armchair. On his fresh chubby face, clean-shaven save for tailored tufts of hair on the cheekbones, there was an expression which was almost benign. Cernik stood bent slightly forward balancing on the balls of his feet, like a fighting man on the edge of movement, every muscle in his body tensed for action.

"I disbelieve you," he said at last.

"You talked," Cheb said blandly, "about your plan to escape into Austria. You discussed the dates. The original date for the escape was September the first. In view of your visit to Brno yesterday and the warnings given you by the Chief of Police, you, Cernik, were in favor of advancing the date. You also discussed the advisability of telling your womenfolk of the plan and decided against it, and you discussed the identity of the spy who has been informing on the Frenchwoman's stupidities. I believe that you suggested that it might be your young American horseman—I even know why you suggested that, Cernik—but the others pooh-poohed the idea. Do you believe now that I know what you talked about, or do you want to hear more?"

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"No more," Cernik said. There were bright red spots on his cheekbones, and his eyes had become small and narrow and ugly. "Who told you?"

"The dwarf."

"Kaka!"

"Who else? You should treat your employees better, Cernik, or, failing that, secure the floorboards of your caravan."

Cernik's face was a picture. Cheb read his thoughts unerringly, threw back his great head, and laughed aloud.

"Violence won't do any good, Cernik. I have made my arrangements. Dead or alive, I hold you in the hollow of my hand."

It was a bitter moment for Cernik.

For three years, ever since the Communists had taken power, Jan had lived with the plan. It had grown in his mind, as a tree grows from a seed, nurtured day by day by the persecution of his friends, by police interrogations and searches, by the growing bewilderment and unhappiness of his fellow-countrymen, until now it completely enveloped him.

He had lived with the plan, and he had lived for the plan. He had conceived it as a magnificent gesture: to take an entire circus through the Iron Curtain would be an act of superb showmanship. It would be a statement of protest and revolt which would be understood and appreciated all over the world.

But the plan had become far more than even a magnificent gesture: it had become an obsession, his dominating aim in life. His future—the future of his family and friends—their very lives—depended on it.

And now a dwarf had told a tale, for spite, and all their dreams were blasted and their lives hung on a thread. And Heinrich Cheb held that thread.

Cernik could see only one slender hope: that somehow he might strike some bargain. He cleared his throat and said, "What do you want, Cheb?"

Cheb said, "Nothing. I merely came to warn you."

These words were meaningless.

Cernik said, "State your terms, Cheb."

"My dear Cernik, if I may say so, you are an obtuse and ungracious little man. I should like some coffee. And then perhaps you will do me the honor of sitting down and talking to me like a human being. I am here to help you. I'm non-political, but if I were a younger man, damn me, I'd come with you! Do you know their latest? They've actually stopped me doing my Jan Hus parade. Decadent, they say. Jan Hus—decadent! By the Lord God, I don't know where it's going to end."

Cernik listened. His face was expressionless, yielding not the slightest flicker of relief, and Cheb, watching him, thought what a cold, hard, unfeeling little man he was. He could not know that Cernik's heart was fluttering like a captive bird's.

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"I take it then," Cernik said quietly, "that you do not intend to inform on me."

"Certainly not," Cheb said. "I have no liking for you, Cernik, but a matter like this is an apple off another tree. Now can I have some coffee?"

Cernik turned to the stove. He lit the gas jet and put the coffee pan on. His hands were unsteady.

"The dwarf came over in the middle of the night," Cheb said. "I'm in Trebic, I suppose you know that. He'd thumbed a lift from a truck. I sent him back, told him to keep his mouth shut, behave as if he knew nothing, and that I'd take him on after you were arrested. If you want my advice, Cernik, I'd move quick if I were you. If that dwarf knows, anybody may know. You don't want to waste time."

"I think that is good advice," Cernik said.

He had accepted the incredible fact that Cheb was friendly and his mind had moved on from this phenomenon and was already at work on the new problems that immediate escape presented. The plan had depended essentially on timing.

Could arrangements be made for tonight? It was all a matter of synchronization, of split-second timing.

And meantime, there was Cheb. "I shall be leaving the tent, Cheb. I should be pleased if you would accept the tent."

"Is it in good condition?"

"It is almost new."

"In that case I accept the tent," Cheb said. "What about the elephants?"

"I am taking the elephants."

"What of the rest of the animals then?"

"You could have the wolves," Cernik said. "But you will have to collect them. We shall be freeing the wolves in order to create a diversion. I am taking everything else with me."

"The tent and the wolves," Cheb said. "It is not as much as I had hoped for."

"When I am gone," Cernik said, "you will have a clear field. No competition."

"That had not escaped me."

"And the tent is in very good condition. You can also have the king-pole wagon. I had forgotten about the wagon."

As Cernik spoke he had been thinking with that brilliant clarity that sometimes illumines the mind in moments of crisis. He saw his course clearly. He saw the entire pattern of events that he must presently devise, and in that complicated pattern he saw a place, and a use, for Cheb.

"Listen, Cheb," he said. "This is how I'm going to do it."

"First, the coffee," Cheb said.

Cernik poured two cups of coffee and placed them on the table. He sat down on the edge of the divan. "We had meant to go over at Uhorska Ves. Now we shall have to

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go over somewhere nearer. Wait till I get a map."

He rummaged in a locker, produced a large-scale map, spread it on the table. "We might go here, between Milkulov and Breclav; there's a good enough road there. We shall go tonight. I can't trust the tent men. I shall send them ahead, somewhere upcountry, say to Maravske-Budejovice, I shall send them ostensibly in the ordinary way, to set up in advance of us. They'll have the king-pole wagon and the tent.

"Now if you would be willing to ambush the tent men that would cause another diversion and would be of value to me."

"That might be arranged," Cheb said. "And meantime you will let the wolves loose somewhere else?"

"Precisely," Cernik said. "Somewhere to the west, just far enough to pull the police from the border. We shall create a formidable confusion. We shall inform the police simultaneously that there are wild animals loose at points A, B, C, and D, and also, if you are agreeable, that there is a circus battle at point E.

"We shall bombard the police and the military with messages, and we shall frighten the public so that they too send in agitated messages. We shall give the authorities time to make their initial dispositions, and then we shall cut the wires between Brno and the frontier, and between the frontier and Breclav and all points east.

"We shall then be in the vicinity of the border, and we shall go over by a simple stratagem or, if need be, by force. But there should be no need of force if the timing is right. The success of the entire plan depends on the timing of the cutting of the wires."

Cheb said, "There are many wires."

"I have twelve motor-bicycles."

Cheb nodded approvingly. "I never could understand why you started that motor-bicycles act." He stroked the hair on his cheek, reflecting. "I am willing to arrange an ambush of your tent men," he said at last. "But we shall have to make arrangements in detail. Where are the wolves to be freed? At what time? And the time and place of the ambush."

They talked for ten minutes, fixing the details.

"Well," Cheb said finally, "I think that's everything. I hope you achieve it, Cernik. There is just one remaining thing. I shall have to wreck your caravan."

"I don't understand."

"We must fight," Cheb said. "It is the only way that I can justify my visit. Kaka will know I am here. Your tent men will know. The police also may learn of it. There must be no suspicion afterwards in the minds of any of them that I have come to warn you. We must fight, and you must throw me out of the caravan in front of them all."

"Very well," Cernik said. "But I

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must ask you to cause as little damage as possible. My wife—"

"I understand perfectly," Cheb said, getting to his feet. "We shall cause as little damage as is consistent with realism. Shall I commence?"

"If you please," Cernik said.

Cheb struck him immediately, and there was nothing artificial about the blow. It was a massive right swing with all the weight of Cheb's 220 pounds behind it, and it caught Cernik on the left cheekbone and knocked him back over the edge of the divan onto the floor.

As he got up, half stunned, shaking his head, Cheb, trumpeting like a rogue elephant, picked up first one cup, then the other, and threw them against the door. He struck at Cernik again, but Cernik dodged and stumbled in close, thrusting his face for protection into the huge belly and at the same time bringing up his knee in an illegitimate but telling blow that evened the score between them.

They grappled and fell together, got up, wrestled, fell again. In a few seconds the caravan became a scene of devastation as one after another of Mama's valued possessions crashed to debris on the floor.

As they rolled from under the table, Cernik contrived to scramble onto Cheb's back, and clung there like a limpet. He got a hand under Cheb's arm and onto the back of his neck, and for a long minute they held this pose, sweat breaking out on their faces as Cernik tried to enforce his half-Nelson, taking the pressure on his wrist and using his arm as a lever to force Cheb's from its socket, while Cheb tried to break the grip with the muscles of his great neck, straining backward with the deliberate intent of snapping Cernik's wristbone.

This was no mock battle. Neither would concede an inch, and some bone must surely have broken if a diversion had not occurred just then. The door was thrust open, and Jaro's voice, calling Cernik's name, came into the caravan.

"Enough," Cernik panted. He got to his feet, flexing his fingers. His shirt and undershirt were torn wide open at the chest, there was already a swelling on his cheekbone, and his mouth was bleeding.

Cheb also got up, shaking himself like some great shaggy bear. He had a red weal across his forehead where it had struck against the iron table clamp. He said, "You'll suffer for this, Cernik."

"Get out," Cernik said. "Get out, and stay out."

He saw the gaping spectators over Jaro's shoulder at the open door, and he raised his voice to insure that everyone heard, "If ever you lay foot in my circus again, I'll kill you, Cheb. You or any of your men, I'll have you shot like the dogs you are."

"You haven't heard the last of this, Cernik," Cheb said. "Not by a long chalk." He brushed past Jaro, and as he went down the steps

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Cernik picked up his sombrero and threw it after him.

One of Cheb's men bent to pick it up, but Conradin said, "No." Conradin was standing with his rifle carelessly in his hands. He had been standing like that for the past half hour, watching Cheb's men; and Cheb's men also had been watching him.

Cheb glared at Conradin and himself picked up his hat. He jammed it on his head. "That's only a taste of what you can expect, Cernik," he said. "From now on it's war between you and me."

There was an ugly movement in the crowd, and Cernik said, "Let them be, men. We don't want trouble with the police. I'll settle this later in my own way."

Mama ran up the steps. "You're hurt, Cernik!"

"It's nothing."

"You're bleeding."

He touched his cheek. "It's nothing, Mama. Jaro, I want to speak to you."

"Daddy," Cara said, hugging him. "Oh, Daddy, I thought he'd killed you. Your poor eye! Mama, where's the first-aid box?"

"All right," Cernik said, raising his voice to the crowd. "All right now, break it up. Get back to work."

"Oh, my God!" Mama said. She began to wail: she had just seen the inside of the caravan. "Look at my lamp. Oh, *cruci*, look at the mess . . ."

"Where are the bandages, Mama?"

"God knows where anything is. There's nothing left. They've even broken the stove. Look at my lovely picture that Maria gave me . . ."

"I'll get bandages from Ma Bratislav, Daddy."

"I don't want bandages," Cernik said. "All I want is just some peace for the next half hour." He looked ruefully at the mess in the caravan. "I'm sorry, Mama," he said gently. "But it's not so bad as it looks. You'll soon tidy it up. Cara will help you."

"At your age!" Mama wailed. "Fighting like an animal . . ."

"Maybe you'd better come over to my place, Cernik," Jaro said.

Cernik thought of all he had to do.

"Yes," he said, and he smiled at the fat man, exhilarated at the prospect of the action that lay ahead of them. "Jaromir, old capon, you and I have work to do—much work."

By mid-afternoon the plan was under way.

A bellman had been around the village announcing that the afternoon and evening shows were canceled. An advance agent had been sent on a wild goose chase to Borovany to rent a site that would never be used and to plaster the town with posters of a circus that would never be seen there.

The Big Top and the assorted tents had been brought down, and

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all the poles, brackets, benches, chairs loaded onto the king-pole truck. The beast wagons had been shuttered and bolted down, the prop trailer packed. Engines, tires, lighting, pulling bars had been checked; provisions taken on board; the land cleared of refuse. The horses still grazed under the sycamore trees, and here and there an odd line of washing hung by a caravan door; but by and large mobilization was complete and the circus stood buttoned up for the road.

All day motor-bicycles had roared out on reconnaissance and had been returning at intervals to bring Cernik news—news of the quality and gradients of the roads between Mikulov and Breclav, of the dispositions at the frontier post, of the telegraph wires between this town and that. Jaro's son brought facts gleaned from the public library in Brno. Fedor returned with a rough copy of a document in Breclav Post Office. All day information poured in, and by four o'clock in the afternoon Cernik had every relevant fact at his fingertips and had made his final arrangements.

With Jaro he walked around the decoy truck—a horse box which was plastered with garish posters of ladies in tights and still more garish posters of nude women, stolen three months before from a theater in Prague. Kubelik was up a ladder with paint pot and brush, putting the finishing touches to a sign which read:

FOR MEN ONLY
The most daring show ever presented

"All right," Kubelik said, grinning. "Eh, Cernik?"

"Looks all right to me," Cernik agreed.

There were some tent men standing by, watching. "What's it for?" one of them asked.

"It's a new show," Cernik said. He looked at his watch. "Why are you fellows still here? You, Houshka. You should have left five minutes ago."

"We haven't had no orders."

Cernik raised his eyebrows. He said, "Tell Zamek I want to see him. Right away."

"Cernik," Kubelik said, "if this does not make our fortunes, so to speak"—and he cracked his favorite joke—"my name is not Josef Maravek."

"Very funny," Jaro said. "You should be a clown, Kubelik."

"You have not seen the point of it," Kubelik said. "I have told you before, but you have forgotten. My true name *is* Josef Maravek."

"You would be a riot in a false nose," Jaro said. "Cernik, do you think it would add to the effect of the notice if we had beneath in smaller letters: 'No man under 21 to be admitted'?"

"By all means," Cernik said. But his mind was elsewhere. He was watching Zamek who had disengaged himself from a group of men playing cards by the lion cage and

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who was now walking toward him. He was watching Zamek, and he was wondering.

Zamek was the gaffer of the tent men. He was a Slovak in his middle thirties, a tall thin man with a long weather-beaten face and perplexed blue eyes. He was highly intelligent, although uneducated, and Cernik would have sworn that he was an honest man. He had been with the circus for the past two seasons, and he was the best foreman Cernik had ever had.

"What's the matter, Zamek?" Cernik demanded. "You've had your orders, haven't you? You should be on the road."

Zamek looked from Cernik to Jaro to the ground. He traced a line on the grass with the toe of his boot.

"Well, what is it?" Cernik insisted.

"I've been thinking it over," Zamek said in a slow hesitant voice. "And I don't like it, Cernik."

"I'm surprised to hear that," Cernik said mildly. He was genuinely surprised, and he was also immediately on guard. He never acted the boss. Every man on the payroll could speak his mind to him, but there were some things he did not expect ever to be challenged on, and circus movements was one of them.

He looked hard at Zamek and saw that Zamek was sweating, and he grew very wary indeed. He said, "What don't you like, Zamek?"

"Well," Zamek said uneasily, "it's this change of plans. We've been going east for the past month, and I thought we were to go across Slovakia, and now all of a sudden there's this change of plan and we're doubling back to Borovany."

"You have a nerve, Zamek—" Jaro began.

"That's all right, Jaro," Cernik said. "The change of plans is none of your business, Zamek, but I don't mind telling you it has to do with Cheb. It concerns a little surprise I have up my sleeve for Mr. Cheb."

"Maybe so," Zamek said. "But that's not all. You've given orders that Foster is to come with us. Foster's never come with us before. He's the horseman. Why should he travel with us? Are you trying to get him out of the way? And why isn't Bratislav going on ahead as usual to mark out the site? I've been thinking about it all day, Cernik, and I don't like it." He looked directly at Cernik, and there was no mistaking the challenge in his eyes. "There's something fishy going on, Cernik. I think you're up to something."

"But what business is it of yours?" Jaro demanded.

"It's my business, all right," Zamek said stubbornly.

"I think we had better discuss this in private, in the wagon," Cernik said, and he made a signal which included Jaro and Kubelik. "Come, Zamek." And all four of them went up the ramp into the wagon.

"Now, Zamek," Cernik said, and his voice was much brisker than it

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had been, "you have made some strange statements. Explain yourself, if you please."

"I don't want to make trouble for you," Zamek said. "You've always treated me decently. I know you're up to something, and I think it has to do with the Countess. She's not worth running any risks for, Cernik. I wouldn't like to see you make a false move. I'm giving you fair warning."

"Go on speaking," Cernik said. He took a half step forward, and Jaro and Kubelik also edged forward, forming a barrier between Zamek and the door. "Go on speaking, Zamek."

"I've said enough."

"You've said too much," Cernik said. "So you're the spy, are you? You're the one who's been informing on Madame?"

"I've only done my duty," Zamek said. He looked at the encircling ring of faces and squared his shoulders. "I've nothing against you, Cernik, but I'm not afraid of you either. I have more power than you think."

"You're a paid government agent?" Cernik said.

"Not exactly."

"Just a busybody," Jaro said.

"No," Zamek said. "I am a loyal citizen. I don't need to be paid to do my duty. The revolution we have had is the greatest thing that has ever happened in Czechoslovakia. It is the duty of all citizens of the Republic to inform on the enemies of the Republic and to take whatever action may be necessary to safeguard the newly acquired liberties of the proletariat."

"For the love of God," Jaro said, "listen to the book talking!"

Zamek was watching Cernik. He saw the signal in Cernik's eyes, and he said in a high-pitched voice, "Don't start any rough stuff, Cernik. For your own sake . . ."

The rest was unspoken. Kubelik's great hands went round Zamek's throat; there was a stifled scream, a moment's vicious flurry of action as when a terrier seizes on a rat.

"Knock him out," Cernik said.

Kubelik swung his right arm like a club; his fist crashed down on Zamek's skull; Zamek's knees sagged and gave way, and he slithered to the floor, falling in a crumpled heap at Cernik's feet.

"So it was Zamek all the time!" Jaro said. "I'd never have thought of Zamek. I always liked him, trusted him. And all the time the swine was spying on us."

"An honest man," Cernik said. "A fanatic if you like, but an honest man. Tie him up, Kubelik. We took him to the right place when we took him to this wagon. There's enough rope here to tie up a regiment."

He looked down at Zamek's body. He was sorry about Zamek, and he was even a little sorry for Zamek. "Fanatics," he said. "They're the dangerous men, Jaro. They're the men you have to watch. An honest man like Zamek here, a fanatic, will

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cause more trouble than a thousand scoundrels."

Jaro smiled. "There are some who might call you a fanatic, Cernik."

"Well," Cernik said, "Maybe I am."

Kubelik lifted a coil of rope from a barrel in the farthest corner. "What are you going to do with him, Cernik?" he asked.

"We'll have to take him with us, that's all we can do. Jaro, we've wasted enough time, we're behind now. Get the tent men away. At once. Make old Klubal foreman. Tell him the road was marked this morning. There shouldn't be any difficulty."

"What shall I tell them about Zamek?"

"Just tell them he's sacked. Get them away quickly. And Jaro—"

"Yes, Cernik."

"Make sure that Foster goes with them."

At 4:16—sixteen minutes behind schedule—the king-pole truck and trailer, with the tent men on board, drew out, and a few minutes later Zamek, bound and gagged and entirely covered by sacking, was carried to the wardrobe van and deposited there under the watchful eye of Ma Bratislav.

At 4:30 the wolf wagon pulled out.

At 5:00 the motor-bicyclists, having received a final briefing, were armed with synchronized watches, wire cutters, and small explosives, and roared dramatically off on their missions.

And then the waiting began.

At 5:30 Cernik walked round the camp, checking that everything was ready and that everyone knew his job. He spoke to everyone, and he told the men that they might now give their womenfolk full details of the plan.

Returning to his caravan, he applied his mind to the matter of Zamek. It was all to the good that Zamek had revealed himself and was now out of harm's way. The problem of the spy had been gnawing at the back of his mind; it had worried him more than he had ever admitted, and it was a relief to know that he need no longer search men's eyes and probe their words for hidden meanings. The presence of a spy in the circus had been the greatest single threat to the security of the plan, and that threat was now removed.

He compared the plan to a giant engine, and the thought pleased him. It was ticking nicely; he could detect no fault in it.

Mama was in one of her good moods. As he came into the caravan she was singing and she flashed him a smile over her shoulder. She was standing by the oven, preparing a meal, and, preoccupied though he was, he noted that she looked very young and pretty. Her hair was sleek and her face was made up, and she was wearing a white blouse with a scarlet scarf knotted at the neck and a black silk skirt.

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The thought flashed through his mind that the clothes she was wearing were not very suitable for traveling. The other women, certainly, would be in dungarees and dust caps. But he was glad that Mama was not like the other women.

He said, "Mama, I have something to tell you. We're going over the border tonight, into Austria."

"Austria!" Mama said, busy with the frying pan. "But I thought we weren't allowed to leave the country."

"We're not allowed. We're breaking out."

She was immediately arrested in her movements. She said, "Is everybody going?"

"Yes," he said. "More or less everybody." He felt the pain that only Mama could give him. He knew that she was thinking of Rudolph. "Yes, the entire circus is going," he said.

She could not even leave it at that. She had to make it abundantly clear to him. "And the animals?"

"Yes," he said. "The animals too." He knew only too well what was in her mind. The lions. Those accursed cats. The cats exercised some terrible fascination over her. She had lain in his arms weeping in a storm of shame the night he had discharged the last trainer, Charles the Englishman. It wasn't the man, she said, it wasn't, it wasn't. She truly hadn't cared about Charles. It was the act and the whip and the smell of the cats. Oh, she couldn't explain it, she wouldn't ever be able to explain it, she didn't have the words, and she didn't have the knowledge of herself.

But Cernik had partially understood, and his gentleness then had been more than she could bear, and she had clung to him in a frenzy of despair, begging him to help her and to save her from herself. And then Rudolph had come in Charles's place, and after a little it had all been as before, with the difference that Rudolph was a man of character.

"Yes, all the animals are coming," Cernik said, "except the wolves. Everybody and everything except the tent men and the Big Top stuff and the wolves. I'd have taken the tent men too, only I couldn't trust them. We have a plan, Mama—I'll tell you about it—but it may not work, and if it doesn't—well, I might as well be frank with you, we may have to fight our way through."

"I'm not afraid, Cernik," Mama said, her eyes brilliant with excitement. "Austria, eh? I've never been in Austria. What's it like?"

"Much the same as here."

"Oh, I'm sure it's not. For one thing, there won't be so many policemen. Will we go to Vienna?"

"I expect so."

"When?"

"Oh, I don't know. Sooner or later."

Mama pirouetted back to the frying pan. "I've always wanted to see Vienna," she said. "All those fine

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boulevards and the Danube and the Prater and the beautiful women and the waltzes!" And she began to hum the *Tauberl-Walzer.*

Cernik thought it likely that Vienna might be something of a disappointment to Mama, but he refrained from saying so. He had not been looking forward to telling Mama of the plan. He had not known what her reaction would be, and he was greatly relieved to find her so pleased.

"When do we cross the border, Cernik?"

"Nine o'clock," he said. "This is the plan, Mama. There are to be diversions to the west to draw the guards from our part of the border. There'll be a great confusion—a circus battle, animals loose, people phoning from all over the district, reporting incidents, demanding protection. And then the wires are to be cut—all the wires—that's the motor-bicyclists' job. And just after that, at 8:25, our advance party is to reach the border at the frontier post—here, I'll show you it on the map—between Mikulov and Breclav."

He put his finger on the spot. "Just there. There are never more than a dozen men at this post, and at least half of them might be drawn off by our diversions to the west. The advance party consists of the elephants and the lions and that wagon you saw Kubelik painting—the one with all the women plastered on it. Vina is to be in that wagon, and Kubelik, and Conradin, and Fedor. The guards will all come out to look at the elephants—I sent the elephants off this morning. The advance party is to rendezvous them near the border. The guards will all be standing about, gaping.

"Rudolph'll show them the cats. Theyll look at the posters on the wagon and ask what the show is. Rudolph will say that he can arrange for them to see it, provided they pay. I think that's a good touch, Mama—to make them pay. So they pay their money, and in they go one at a time. There's a lot of laughing and screaming from Vina inside the wagon, and Conradin and Kubelik and Fedor will laugh too, but most of all it will be Vina's voice that the guards will hear.

"Only one is to be admitted at a time, and as he goes in he's knocked out, and Vina gives a little scream and laughs her head off. I think it'll work—it's the sort of simple trick that does work—and if it does, then we leave the wagon locked up at the frontier and the circus streams through."

Mama nodded in approval. "I don't see why it should be your sister, though. I could attract the men into the wagon a lot better than Vina could—you know I could Cernik."

"They won't see her," Cernik said. "It will be just her voice."

Mama put her hands on her hips. "And do you think, Jan Cernik, that your sister Vina has more allure in her voice than I have?"

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"Of course not, Mama. You have more allure than any woman in the circus. Far more. It was just that someone suggested Vina, and I agreed without thinking—"

"And who, I should like to know, suggested Vina in preference to me?"

"I think," Cernik lied, "that it was Jaro." In fact, it had been he himself who had insisted that Vina, as the most reliable of the women, should do this job, and he had had to bully Jaro into agreeing.

"Jaro, it would be Jaro!" Mama said. "That Jaro, he sometimes has the idea that he's running this circus. But fancy even Jaro thinking that his wife has more sex appeal than me! Goodness knows, I've nothing against Vina, Cernik, but really—"

"If you've nothing against her," Cernik said, "don't say it, Mama."

"All right," she said unexpectedly, and she smiled in genuine amusement. "I won't. But tell me, Cernik, what's going to happen if the trick doesn't work?"

"If the trick doesn't work we shoot our way through. The elephants will crash the barrier, and we go through by force. It shouldn't be difficult. There haven't been any incidents at this post, and they're not expecting trouble, and they can't call up reinforcements. Conradin thinks he could do the whole job by himself if need be, but all the men will be armed, and there are openings concealed under the posters along the sides of the wagon that they can shoot through. We'll get out all right, Mama. And you'll like Austria, I'll guarantee that. We'll find winter quarters somewhere in the Tyrol, high up, and—who knows?—we might go into Switzerland, or even to Italy."

Mama sighed happily. And then, suddenly, in that pleasurable and exciting moment, she remembered. Her hand flew to her mouth in an ugly gesture of alarm, and her eyes swelled with fear.

"Cernik!" she said. "The tent men!"

"They're on the way to Borovany. They're to be ambushed—"

"No, no," Mama said. "It's Cara! Cara is with the tent men."

"I don't understand."

"Cara, Cernik. She's with them! Oh, God help us! She asked me to cover up for her. Oh, Cernik, what have I done?"

Cernik felt cold. He said slowly, "What are you talking about, Mama? How could Cara be with the tent men?"

"She went with Foster."

And then the whole story came tumbling out. For several weeks past, each time the circus had traveled by day, Cara had gone with Foster and the horses. Mama had known, had known too what Cernik's reaction would be, and she had deliberately helped Cara to deceive him.

"There's nothing wrong about it, Cernik," Mama said. "She's a good

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girl. And Foster. I don't care what you say about him. I know men. He's a good boy, Cernik." She faltered before his gaze, and began to sob. "Don't hit me, Cernik," she begged. "How was I to know? Oh, Cara!" And unable to bear Cernik's eyes, she slumped down at the table and hid her face in her arms and wept bitterly.

Cernik tore the door open and ran.

He burst into Jaro's caravan, where Vina sat placidly knitting and Jaro stood by the window cleaning a rifle.

"Cara's gone with Foster," Cernik said. "With the tent men. I'm going after her. I'm taking the Opel. Get the advance party off at 7:15. If I'm not back by 8:00, hook my caravan onto one of the trucks and leave without me."

They had no chance to speak. He was gone.

Cernik drove with his foot hard down on the accelerator. The Opel was an old car, first licensed in 1938. The body was scarred with make-shift patches, the windshield cracked, the mud guards corroded. But the engine was sound. Cernik serviced it himself, with meticulous care, and two days ago he had checked it over, cleaned the plugs, drained, flushed, and refilled the sump. He had confidence in the engine. He knew what it could do, and made it do it.

He kept the speedometer needle flickering around the eighty kilometer mark, ruthlessly using the whole road and trusting to luck at the corners.

It was a fine evening. Ideal for the plan, he thought bitterly. The sun shone on the mountains, pricking color from the bare peaks, mellowing the somber pine woods and lighting up the bright-tagged half-grown saplings of the foothills. Young linnets in flocks rose in alarm at Cernik's approach, and here and there peasants, at work in the fields, carting oats, hoeing turnips, flailing wheat, stopped work to stare after the roaring, bouncing car, and shake their heads in disapproval. Cernik saw nothing but the road.

He had been using the secondary road to the south of the Thaya. Now, at Satov, he crossed the river and bore northwest, along the broad Jemnice road that Bratislav, earlier that afternoon, had "marked" for the king-pole truck. He calculated that, allowing the king-pole truck twenty kilometers per hour he should overtake it in the region of Jemnice.

The ambush didn't worry him. The ambush would not take place until 8:25, and he didn't give it a thought. What obsessed him was the need to get back to organize the circus's departure. Unless he overtook the king-pole truck by 7:00 he could never get back by 8:00, and he might even be unable to reach the frontier post in time to go through with the circus.

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Occasionally, in the dust at the roadside he fancied he could see traces of the broad tires of the truck, and he told himself that the tracks were fresh, and drove furiously on. From time to time he cursed Foster with unfamiliar profanity and leaned forward, gripping the wheel with all his strength concentrated in his fingers, trying to coax a few extra kilometers from the racing engine.

He caught up with the king-pole truck earlier than he had dared hope. It was drawn up in an open parking place by a wayside cafe, just beyond the village of Nova Trentlova. He looked at the time as he pulled the Opel up behind the truck. 6:41.

Inside the cafe the tent men were seated at a long table, talking boisterously, munching *pareks* and salami sandwiches and swilling down red table wine. As they became aware of Cernik standing straddle-legged in the doorway their conversation died away, and the silence spread until it included not only the circus party but also the workmen playing cards at a corner table and the man and woman behind the counter. In the unnatural silence everyone watched Cernik.

"Come here, Cara," he said.

She got up immediately from her place at the bench beside Foster and came toward him, red and embarrassed, a shame-faced child. Old Klubal came bustling up between them, intent on justifying his new promotion.

"See here, Cernik," Klubal said guiltily, "we only been stopped five minutes. The boys wanted a break. The engine's a bit hot, too. I thought there'd be no harm in stopping. But five minutes only, I said."

Cernik forced himself to consider what his reaction would have been if the circumstances had been normal. "Well, get them going," he said roughly. "Five minutes is long enough to stop on the road. Come on, Cara."

Klubal turned away, and began immediately to bluster at the tent men.

Cara said in a low voice, "Don't make a scene, Daddy. Please don't make a scene in front of them all. I'm not coming back, and you can't make me. I won't be treated like a naughty child in front of all these men."

"This is something you don't understand," Cernik said. "I'll explain to you later. You're coming with me—*now*."

She said, "Well, can Foster come too?"

"No, he cannot."

"In that case," Cara said, "I shall stay, Daddy."

He moistened his lips. This was a difficulty he had not bargained for. He had been intent on overtaking Cara. It had not occurred to him that, having overtaken her, there could be any further trouble. If he had thought of it at all, he had thought merely that he would pack her into the car, and that would be

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that. He saw now that it was not to be so easy. He said, "I order you to come, Cara."

"Daddy," she said earnestly, "I've always done everything you ever asked me. But you are asking me to do something that disgraces me in front of the men. Take Foster too. You could say that you want Foster for something to do with the horses. If you make it look as if you've come for Foster, I'll come with you. But I won't come without him. I won't have them thinking that you've chased after us just to bring me home—as if I'd done something wrong—or as if you thought I would."

Cernik looked at his daughter in perplexity. He saw that she was trembling, that there was the glitter of tears in the back of her eyes; but he saw also that she was set in her foolishness, determined to have her way.

He was tempted to turn her upside down and spank her there and then and to carry her forcibly to the car; but, angry and urgent though he was, he had sense enough to realize that this was a delicate matter, not to be resolved by force.

Cara had deceived him, but it had been a relatively innocent deception. She still trusted him and depended on him; her continuing faith, her confidence in him, their whole future relationship might depend on his handling of this difficult situation. And he did not know quite how to handle it.

"Please, Daddy," she whispered. "Take Foster. Just to save my face. You can scold me all you like afterwards. But please take him, please, Daddy!"

He felt time—valuable, essential time—slipping away from him. He began to sweat.

"Please, Daddy!"

"Foster," he said sharply, "you're needed at the circus. The rosin-back. I came to get you. Look smart now!" And he took Cara by the arm and hustled her unceremoniously through the door.

Cara sat beside him in the front seat; Foster sat directly behind him, leaning forward, and every now and again he felt, with distaste, the boy's breath on his neck. He drove east as he had driven west, with nicely calculated recklessness.

There was little conversation.

Cara said, "Are you very angry with me, Daddy?"

Cernik said, "Very. But we'll discuss that when we're alone."

Later, after a great deal of throat clearing, Foster said, "What's wrong with the rosin-back, sir?"

And Cernik said, "Nothing."

Later still, as they were passing through Satov, the sight of a small child crossing the road aroused a sudden, disturbing thought in Cernik's mind, and he said, "Where was Kaka, Cara? I didn't see Kaka in the cafe."

"Kaka wasn't with us, Daddy."

Cernik said sharply, "Didn't he

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leave the circus in the king-pole wagon?"

"No—at least, I didn't see him. Did you?" she asked Foster.

"What's that?" Foster begged, edging forward like a dog.

"Kaka," Cara said. "He wasn't with us, was he?"

"No," Foster said. "No, sir, I haven't seen the dwarf all day."

Cernik sucked his lips into a thin tight line. Kaka always traveled with the tent men. Why wasn't he with the tent men now? Where could he be? What mischief was he up to?

Cernik took a hand off the steering wheel, slipped a cigarette into the corner of his mouth, and lit it adroitly. If he lived through this day he would not readily forget it. Only a few hours ago it had seemed that nothing could go wrong. Now it seemed that nothing would go right.

He glanced at his watch. It was tempting fate to entertain the thought. Nevertheless he entertained it; at least he was making good time.

There were no flags out for Cernik when he drove up twenty minutes before the time scheduled for the circus's departure. No one cheered. No one even mentioned that he or she was glad to see Cernik back. Nevertheless, it was a triumphant return.

All the circus folk converged on the car as he drew it up by his caravan, and he saw his welcome on their faces and felt their unspoken relief. He got out and stretched himself, noting that the horses were now in the horse boxes and that all the trailers were hooked to their trucks.

"Bratislav," he said. "Get me tied up to the Opel. Jaro, I want to speak to you." And he walked a few yards away from the crowd.

"It's Kaka," he said.

"I've been waiting to speak to you about Kaka," Jaro said. "He's here, Cernik. I found him just after you left."

"Where?"

"With Madame. He's been with her all day."

"Madame again!" Cernik said. "Why didn't he go with the tent men?"

"Says he was scared. After that business with the apes' food. Appears some of the tent men thought he got off too light and they told him what they were going to do to him. They were going to give him the thumb."

It was an old tenting torture, and Cernik could understand Kaka's fear. He nodded, partially satisfied. "Where is he now?"

"In Madame's caravan, hiding behind her skirts. He's singing very low. Wants to apologize to everybody."

"He's still scared, eh?"

"Scared stiff," Jaro said. "What are we to do with him, Cernik?"

"Leave him with her," Cernik said. "He's safer with Madame than

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wandering around the countryside. We've pulled his teeth. Just let him be."

"Cernik," Mama called from the door of the caravan, "do you want to eat?"

He had not eaten since midday, and he knew that he ought to be hungry, but the thought of food sickened him. "Coffee," he said. "Just some coffee. What's the matter, Jaro? You look about as gay as Grimaldi."

"It's Vina," Jaro said. "They'll have picked up the elephants by now. They must be very near the frontier. I can't help worrying about her, Cernik."

Cernik nodded. He also was anxious, and he knew that if Mama had been in the decoy wagon his anxiety would have been almost unbearable. This was no time for facile optimism. He clapped Jaro on the shoulder. "I'm going to have some coffee before we hit the road. Come and have a cup with me. But first, while I'm getting cleaned up, you might tell Cara the plan. She doesn't know anything about it yet. Give her the details."

"She's to help Ma Bratislav with the ammunition, isn't she?"

"That's right," Cernik said. "See you later." And he turned away, pulling at the tired flesh around his jaw, and stepped into his caravan.

"I *am* sorry, Cernik," Mama said. "Truly sorry."

"No harm done, " said Cernik, wrestling with his shirt.

"I didn't mean to deceive you, I truly didn't, Cernik. It was just that she wanted so much to go, you see, and I didn't think there was any harm in it."

"All right, Mama," Cernik said. "Forget it."

He washed to the waist, soaping away the sweat under his arms, exulting in the shock of the cold water. "First thing I'm going to do in Austria is sleep," he said. "I'm going to sleep for twenty-four solid hours. How's that coffee, Mama?"

"Just on the boil."

He was toweling himself vigorously when there was a knock on the door. He said, "Come in, Jaro." But it was Foster who stepped into the caravan, closing the door carefully behind him.

"I just heard where we're going," Foster said. "I had to speak to you." He stood inside the open door, long-legged and gangling and awkward.

Cernik stopped toweling himself and looked at the boy's long earnest face. Horseman! he thought. Looks like one of his own foals. He began to towel himself again. "So what?" he demanded.

Foster looked from Cernik to Mama, searching for an ally. "I can't come," he blurted out. "I can't leave the country. Listen, this is how it is. I'm a deserter."

Cernik's eyes were cold.

"I'm not an ordinary deserter. I didn't desert during the war. It was after. Listen, Mr. Cernik, you got

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to believe me. I was nearly due to go home."

"You were in the U.S. Army?" Cernik said.

"That's right —in the infantry. I would never have deserted if the war hadn't been over. Listen, please believe me, Mr. Cernik. I couldn't go home. I was married, you see. And my wife, I'd had a letter from her. Listen, I was a farm boy at home, that's how I know about horses. And I got married before I went overseas. I married my boss's daughter. I was only a kid, and so was she. We only had three weeks, that was all, and then I was sent overseas. And then I got this letter from her, saying she was divorcing me, she was sorry and all that, she wanted to marry some other fellow, fellow I never heard of. She said it wouldn't make no difference to her old man, she said my old job was waiting for me on the farm.

"But I couldn't go home, Mr. Cernik. Folks being sorry for me, same folks that told me I was a fool to marry her—and they were right. Going back to my old job on the farm, that was a helluva thing for her to say, and her and her new husband there! Folks watchin' me to see how I was takin' it, and being sorry for me, and talkin' about me and mebbe laughin' at me a little too, how I was the green boy thought I was settin' myself up pretty for life.

"Mr. Cernik, Mrs. Cernikova, you got to see it, I couldn't go home. And so I walked out. Technically, I'm a deserter. But that's not the way I see it. I've never done anything I have to be ashamed of, I've never done any harm to any mortal living person. But I can't go into Austria. If I cross the border, they'll arrest me, I'll be sent home, sent to prison for mebbe a year, mebbe two years. You got to believe me, Mr. Cernik, that's the truth I been tellin' you, the whole truth, and that's why I can't come with you."

"I believe you, Foster," Cernik said.

He pulled on his shirt and began to button it up. He believed every word the boy had spoken. Sincerity shone out of him. It was as Mama had said. He was a good boy, a good honest boy whose life, like so many thousands of others, had been knocked out of joint by the war.

Now that Foster could no longer be a menace to Cara's happiness, Cernik looked at him for the first time with unprejudiced eyes, and liked what he saw. He said, "I'm sorry you can't come with us, Foster," and it was almost — although not quite—true. "I understand your position. And now you want your wages, that's it, isn't it?"

"Not exactly," Foster said. He shifted his weight gawkishly from one foot to the other. "Listen," he said. "Oh, darn it, ain't no way to say it but to tell you right out. I'm here to ask your permission to ask Cara to marry me."

Cernik stiffened.

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"You must be mad in the head," Cernik said.

"No, listen, please listen to me, Mr. Cernik. I told you I was married before. I told you the truth about that; don't hold it against me. I was only a kid, I didn't know what I was doing. This is different, the way Cara and I feel. This is for keeps. I'll be a good husband to her, Mr. Cernik, I swear I will . . ."

As Foster talked, Cernik pulled out his note case, selected three notes, and laid them on the table. His voice cut sharply through Foster's protestations. "There's your money. Take it, and get out!"

"You don't understand," Foster said. "Oh, golly, I been tryin' to do it the proper way, like I want it to be done. I been askin' you. Now I got to tell you. If you're going into Austria, Cara's stayin' with me."

Cernik said with dangerous calm. "I see. Have you consulted Cara?"

"I have, sir. She knows the whole story, and she's going to stay with me. We'll get married, get jobs with some other circus—"

"Has it occurred to you," Cernik said, "that Cara cannot marry without my consent?"

"I don't see why not."

"She's not old enough, that's why not."

"She's a woman," Foster argued. "She's twenty."

"She is seventeen."

"She's twenty," Foster said. He appealed desperately to Mama. "She told me she was twenty."

"She's only seventeen, Foster," Mama said.

"And as such," Cernik said, "she cannot, and will not, marry anybody."

Foster had gone very red in the face. He looked from Cernik to Mama in a dismay that, in other circumstances, might have seemed comical. "I wish she hadn't told me. Just the same," he said, "she'll stay with me."

"Mama," Cernik said, "get Cara!"

Mama nodded and went to the door.

"I wish you'd listen to me, Mr. Cernik!"

And then Mama gave a little scream and backed away from the door, and Cernik saw that Zamek stood there, a revolver in his hand; his eyes no longer bewildered but burning with a fanatical purpose.

Foster, his reflexes conditioned by American films, had already put his hands up. Now, obeying a jerk of the revolver, Mama also raised her hands. Cernik, fingers soft with fear, fastened the last button on his shirt. He said, "What nonsense is this, Zamek?"

"No nonsense, Cernik," Zamek said, "and you know it. I've found out what you mean to do, and I thank God I've found out in time to stop you."

"I thought God was a bourgeois capitalist conception," Cernik said, using words as a shield—the first words that came into his head. "I'm surprised to hear such a term

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on your lips. How did you get free?" He remembered Kaka. "That accursed dwarf, I suppose."

"Never mind how I got free," Zamek said. "Cernik, listen to me. You've been misguided, you're making a mistake—a tragic mistake. This government is ours. It belongs to us. It's made up of people like you and me. I've been with you for two years, I know you, Cernik. You're no traitor. But this is the act of a traitor, don't you see?

"Cernik, you've been misled, you've got to countermand your orders. I'll see to it you get a fair trial. I'll speak for you myself . . . Don't move, Foster! One more move like that, and I'll put a bullet in you! . . .I'm going to open the door, Cernik, and you're going to call for Jaro, tell him the escape is off, tell him to send someone to recall the advance party. You were crazy to think you could ever do this thing. Now don't argue, Cernik. You've no choice. Cooperate with me, and I'll do all I can to help you. Refuse, and I have to kill you.—"

Cernik said, "Listen, Zamek, you and I have always got on well together. I respect you, and I think you respect me. We have different points of view. You're entitled to your point of view and surely I'm entitled to mine. You don't want to kill me, Zamek. You're not a murderer, you're an honest man. Go your way, and let me go mine."

"No use, Cernik," Zamek said. "You're talking crazy. There's only one true belief, my belief, our Czechoslovak belief. You're acting like a traitor. You're a traitor to the cause, Cernik. It's my duty to stop you."

"But you can't stop me," Cernik argued.

He was playing desperately for time. At any moment Jaro should arrive for his coffee, and the moment of Jaro's arrival would be the moment for action.

"You can't stop the circus going through now. You may kill me, but that won't stop the circus, and it won't do you any good, Zamek, or your cause either, because the sound of your shot will bring every circus man here, and they'll kill you."

"I'm not afraid to die, Cernik. You can't frighten me. If I have to die, I shall die gladly. I shall have done my duty." He pulled the door wide open, simultaneously flattening himself against the wall. "Call for Jaro, Cernik," he said. "Order him to cancel all these crazy plans to escape."

"I shall not call for Jaro," Cernik said. He had begun to sweat. He felt sweat trickling, like columns of lice, down his chest, down his flanks, down his arms into his hands. "I shall never give that order."

Zamek cocked his wrist, leveling the revolver so that it pointed at Cernik's head. Zamek was sweating too. "Last chance, Cernik. Call Jaro!"

"I shall never call him."

He saw Zamek's burning eyes and the little deadly dark hole

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through which his death would travel faster than sound. He saw the two blazing orbs and the dull orb, and saw them only. They loomed, and fixed him. There was nothing else in his field of vision. There was nothing else, and now never could be anything beyond this terrible triangle. As from a long way off he heard a voice, Zamek's, say, "It's my duty," and another voice, a strange voice, his own: "It won't do you any good, Zamek."

Mama, watching Zamek's trigger finger, screamed suddenly, and Foster moved, flinging himself forward at Zamek in an acrobatic leap that carried him over an intervening chair. He flew through the air, and the clawing fingers of his hand at the full stretch of his arm touched the muzzle of the revolver at the very moment of explosion.

And then, for Cernik, there was only a fearful confusion.

There were more explosions. There were voices. Voices everywhere. Voices and faces. There was Mama, there was Cara, there was Jaro, Bratislav, Foster. There was blood. Blood in his hand. He turned his wrist and spilled it on the floor.

Mama had become Cara, had become his old mother, had become Cara again. Cara was crying. "Don't cry, Cara," he wanted to say.

"Daddy, Daddy," she was saying —why did she have to shout so? . . . "I can't leave him now, I can't ever leave him. You see that, Foster, don't you!"

Of course he saw. He tried to say, "I'm not going to leave you, Cara," but he didn't know whether he said it or not. He wished they wouldn't all shout so . . .

Mama was sponging him now. Mama was crying too. Silly Mama. With her little cool tickling hands. And Foster's face was stuck on top of Mama's head, grotesquely, and Foster was saying, "All right, I'll drive the Opel. Listen, Cernik. I'll give myself up. You need every man now. I'll get a year, mebbe two, but I'll come back. She'll wait for me. I'm coming back for her Cernik, if I have to swim."

"That's right," Cernik said. Or thought he said. "You drive the Opel, Foster." A good boy, Foster, he thought. A good honest boy.

Jaro said, "Everybody out!" Jaro was hurting him. "Scream if you want to," Jaro said. He tried to say, "Go to hell," but was almost sure afterward that he hadn't said it.

Mama put something in his mouth, something that wasn't meant to go in anybody's mouth, a stocking or a rolled-up bandage. "Bite on that," somebody shouted.

The pain was too much, and the smell strange and horrible, and he was being suffocated. He shouted, "I want to get away from it all," or would have shouted if it hadn't been for the thing in his mouth, and his wish was immediately granted, and he faded away . . .

And then when he came back

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from being a long way off, Mama was with him, only Mama, thank God, smoothing his hair back from his forehead, moistening his lips with water, whispering of her love and her need of him, making wild beautiful promises that he knew very well she could never keep.

"*Drahousku*, oh, *drahousku*, darling," she kept saying, and her tears fell softly on him.

He wanted to tell her not to cry, that it was all right, that everything was all right, that he was going on a long journey with his golden girl, that he was very, very happy. But he was too tired to speak. All he could do was drop his hand on to her sleek bowed head, and then he slipped away again . . .

He was still sleeping when the circus crossed the frontier. It crossed at 9:00, on schedule and without incident, and, leaving behind it a horse box plastered with pictures of nude women, the circus streamed proudly into Austria.

The adventure of the Circus Cernik did not go unnoticed. There were posters in the streets of the world next day, and banner headlines in a thousand newspapers. Cernik was pleased with the press notices. He had them sent to him from all over Europe, from Asia, from America, and he got Mama to paste them in scrapbooks.

During his convalescence he made a hobby of studying these clippings, and he learned some of them by heart. He particularly liked the leading article in the *Continental Daily Mail* in which his feat of taking elephants through the Iron Curtain was compared to that of putting camels through the eye of a needle.

But his favorite extract was from *Pravda*, and he liked to recite it in full.

"It is reported from Prague that last night the Circus Cernik, en route in thick fog to Borovany, inadvertently crossed the frontier into Austria between Mikulov and Breclav. When the error was discovered the circus immediately turned about, but Austrian guards refused to permit its return and opened fire on the defenseless caravan folk, killing T. Zamek, foreman in charge of tents, and wounding others.

"The Czechoslovakian Government has sent a strongly worded note to the Austrian Government, demanding the immediate return of the circus and full reparations. It has also instructed its ambassador in Vienna to send similar strong representations to the occupying powers.

"Further details of the outrage are still awaited, but it is already clear that this is the most flagrant case yet reported of the persistent kidnaping of Czechoslovakian nationals by agents of the Western powers. Tass reports that Jan Cernik, proprietor of the Circus Cernik, was a staunch supporter of the new Republic, and a leading member of the Czechoslovak Communist Party."

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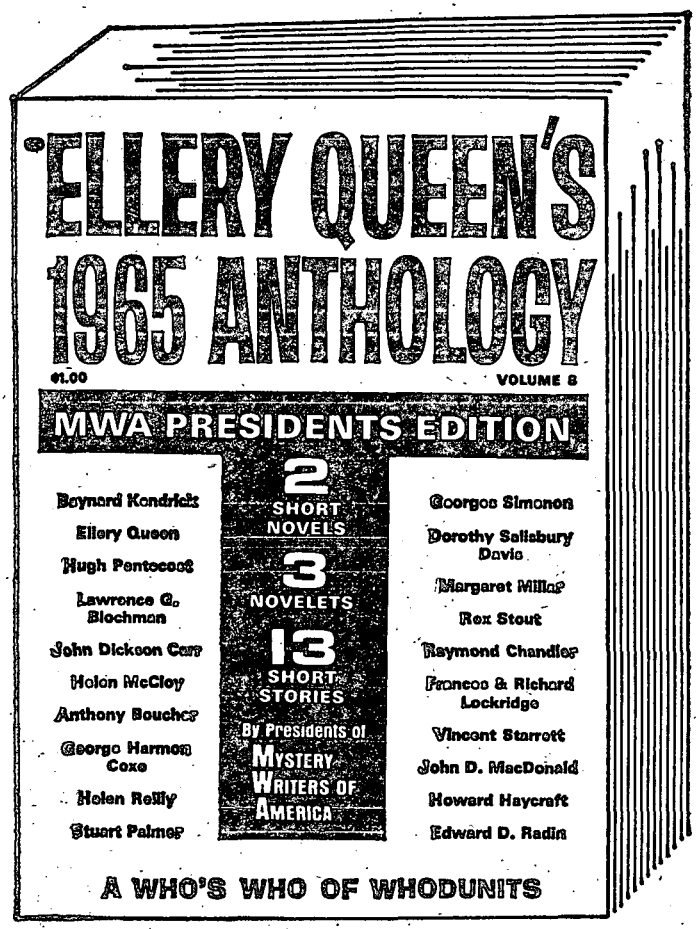

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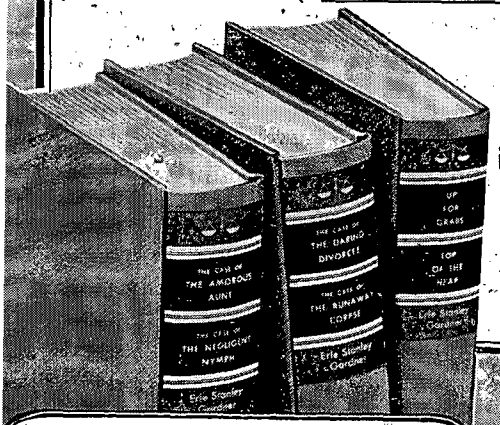
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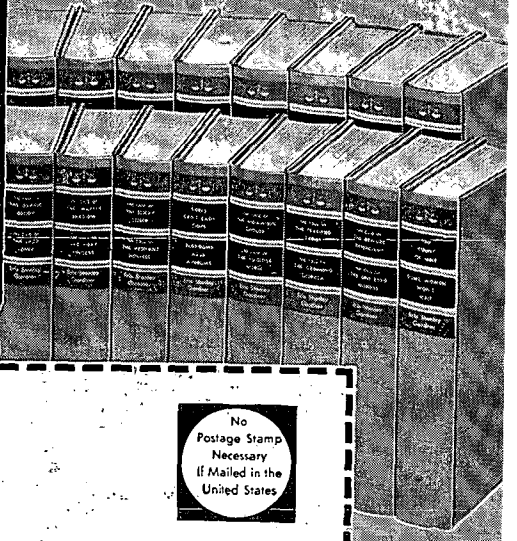

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